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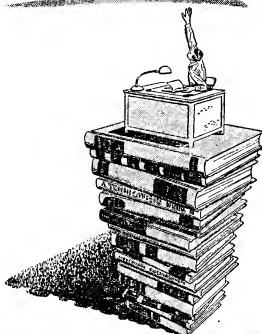
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The

OBSERVATORY

by the Editor

THEIR FACES took on a baffled, suspicious look. "A science-fiction convention? You nuts or something? Why d'ya want to waste your time in listening to a bunch of kids whoop it up for rocket ships and ray guns? You must be kidding!"

BUT WE were never more serious. To begin with, we were already pretty much sold that even the younger readers of science fiction had stopped long ago being rocket-and-ray fanatics. Almost our only contact with the readers of *Amazing Stories* was through their letters, and seldom did those letters have the "guess-I'd-better-be-blasting-off; see-you-on-Mars" phrasing so common ten years or so ago. Most were in a thoughtful, intelligent vein: dead serious and a lot more helpful to the editors than the writers probably realized.

SO, TO PROVE we weren't kidding, we grabbed a plane one afternoon, and six or seven hours later were in Portland, Oregon, in time for the opening of the NORWESCON—the 1950 World Science Fiction Convention. It was to run for four days at one of the halls in the imposing and beautifully appointed Hotel Multnomah. We found the place without difficulty, and one of the committee members painlessly extracted a dollar from us and pinned a label with our name to our coat lapel. That got us past the guard at the door and into a crowd of three or four hundred delegates (if that's the correct word).

IMMEDIATELY we spotted a few old friends: Rog Phillips, rumored to be a science-fiction writer; Mel Korshak, leading publisher of novels in the sf field; Bea Mahaffey, possibly the brains and certainly the beauty behind *Other Worlds* and *Imagination*; and Anthony Boucher, co-editor of *The Magazine of Science-Fiction and Fantasy* and as brilliant a public speaker as he is a writer and critic—and that's saying plenty! Doc Smith was there: as erudite and charming a gentleman as you'll find anywhere.

AS FOR THE actual business meetings and general discussions that took place during those four days, it would

serve no purpose for us to describe them here. It is enough to say that they were conducted with the efficiency and thoroughness you'd expect to encounter at a convention of the Association of American Bankers. Highlights, as far as we're concerned, were meeting Kenneth Arnold, whose sighting of the so-called "flying saucers" a few years ago touched off world-wide amazement and amusement; a "lecture" on Dianetics; our honest astonishment (and secret gratification) at being asked by many of the fans for our autograph; the DeCourcy's demonstration of their newest invention—a teleportation machine (pat. pending); and meeting a young lady named Nancy Moore who is so beautiful that we've asked her to send us a photograph of herself for use on one of our covers!

SUMMING up: while the Norwesecon was our first science-fiction convention, we're determined that it shall not be our last. Next year, conditions permitting, the convention will be held at New Orleans; and if it's half the success that the one in Portland proved to be, you can't afford to miss it!

ONE OF the stories on our table of contents this month deserves, we think, special mention here. It was written by an author new to our pages but certainly no newcomer to science fiction. Originally it was selected for an appearance in the *new* AMAZING; but circumstances make it possible for us to present it here. If you like satire and a pointed commentary on world affairs today, be sure to read H. Beam Piper's "Operation R.S.V.P.—one of the finest pieces of writing we've come across in a long, long time!"

ANOTHER writer, new to us and as far as we know new to you, makes his appearance this month. He's Walter M. Miller, Jr., author of "Secret of the Death Dome"—a story that came to us along with a hundred or so manuscripts one day, with nothing to distinguish it except that it caught our interest with the first sentence and never let go until we had finished the last word. We're sure it will do the same for you! —HB

LANDING ON LOKI



By CARTER T. WAINWRIGHT



"THE LUNA 'scopes tagged this baby," Mark said to Fenner. "Mass, density and diameter check to three places. Even the albedo agrees. The astronomers are better than I thought."

"Hell," grunted Fenner, "I'm not worried about the niceties of astronomy, Mark. What about fuel supply? They checked that pretty close too."

"It'll get us away," Mark replied. "The surface gravity of Loki is low enough and I'll conserve all I can in the landing. This is a cinch. Think of the glory, Fen; we'll be the first."

"Glory? I wonder. Pluto itself is strewn with pioneers. Let's just hope that Loki doesn't act the same way."

"We'll make it, Fen. We'll make it."

The ellipsoid that was their ship was decelerating rapidly as it approached the outermost planet of the Solar System. Little Loki, located a hundred years before, in nineteen fifty-one, was about to get its first visit from Man.

Humans had spread the tentacles of their living over the entire System, slowly and gradually. The long six billion mile haul to Loki had been taboo until now. And only a small increase in fuel efficiency had done it. But still only two humans could be accommodated. Mark and Fenner both had long experience in the Jovian run. Hence their chance for this exploratory jump.

They didn't expect to find much on the sunless world of Loki to whom the sun was a mere pinpoint a little brighter than the stars. But there was chance for mineral development and the System Council was missing no bets. Already they'd upped the resources a million-fold when the rich veins of Plutonian mineral sources were tapped.

It was only a matter of hours before Mark brought the ellipsoid in for the landing. The bleak dark surface beneath him was not reassuring but with the skill borne of much practice in the plus grav landings on Jupiter, Mark eased the vessel soundly to the "terrain".

Fenner made the first exodus. "I'll make a prelin check, Mark," he told him, "then maybe we both can get out. I'm armed with a hot beam too. Keep me on twenty megacycles and don't ever lose touch. I don't want to rot inside my can in some stinking crevice!"

"Got it, Fen!"

As Fenner slipped through the airlock, Mark called: "Shake it up, boy. I want some of the glory too!"

Fenner laughed.

Fenner walked the barren surface, as grim and empty as an asteroid. No liq-

uids flowed in these temperatures there were only traces of gases. To all intents and purposes Loki appeared as forlorn and lifeless as the Moon.

Stony ridges and powdery hills made up the planet's terrain. No instruments clicked for the Geigers registered only radioactivities. That was out. What good was this planet, Fenner thought, but periodically he chipped away specimens. Copper-bearing ores would be in demand but their determination depended upon the spectrograph inside the ship.

Periodically Mark's "Checking, Fen, where are you?" came over the phones. "All o.k. Mark," Fenner'd reply and trudge on.

He made a three kilometer circuit of the vessel and was on his way back when he spotted them!

Coming directly toward him were two huge boulders, rolling with purpose and animation that was a parody on life itself. They bounced and jounced over the terrain like two monstrous billiard balls.

"Mark!" Fenner screamed, "Something's here! God only knows what these lumps of rock are but I think they're alive!"

"Shoot!" Mark cried over the phones, "shoot, Fen!"

Fen awkwardly brought up the hot-beam and let a blast sizzle at the "rocks". He could see sparks fly but their velocity only increased.

Mark caught his last words—"I'm done, Mark. I'm done!"—and then silence.

Mark went white with fear inside the ship. There was something there. Could he leave Fen. Fen's dead, you fool, he told himself. After that cry, who'd live.

Mark readied the controls, making the prelims to blasting. Even as he did so he felt the ellipsoid shiver under the impact of some tremendous blow. He saw the quartzite ports cave in under the pounding of a huge rock. The ship reverberated like a tin-can until the air blew out. Desperately Mark worked controls and at last was rewarded with a surge of acceleration. The ellipsoid was off and he knew he'd make Terra. The ports could be repaired in space but it was a long ride home.

The ship rose far above malignant Loki and Mark looked down at the heap of living rocks imbued with senseless animosity. Fenner didn't want glory—but he got it. Mark shuddered and set about checking the damage. The stout hull had withstood the blows but there was lots to do.

He went to work. Heroes don't dream. They act. And the ellipsoid surged with increasing velocity away from petro-living Loki...

EMPIRE OF

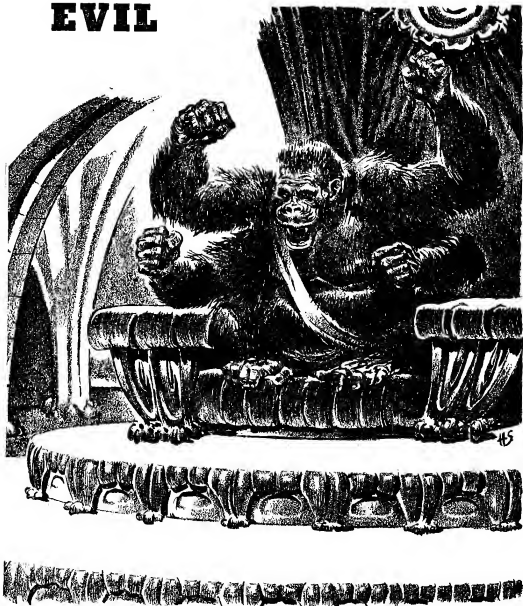
By Robert Arnette

**All that stood between Earth and
final destruction was a creature
from Mercury which no one trusted**



"Flog her!" Tza-Necros screamed. "No woman can be unfaithful to me—and live!"

EVIL



A BLUE Mercurian, arrogance in every line of his shell-covered body, was leading a white Earth-girl up the street. The Earth-girl was practically naked. She walked with head bent, shoulders drooping—a creature without hope. The rope around her slender waist,

by which the Mercurian hauled her along, had raised a cruel, circular abrasion on her otherwise smooth brown skin.

The girl stumbled and the Mercurian jerked ruthlessly at the rope just as a pair of Darrien's black-tailed Venusian fighters paused in

passing to grin and lay lascivious hands upon the girl's body.

The Mercurian snarled and yanked the girl away. "Mine!" he spat, and laid a hand on the zam-gun at his belt. He pushed the girl behind him and faced the two Venusians, ready to kill or be killed in defense of his rare prize.

Ordinarily there would have been quick death here—either one Mercurian spilling out his green blood on the walk, or two Venusians stiff in death, their black tails twitching and snapping. The Venusians, who considered themselves the aristocrats of Darrien's hideous army, had more than once taken loot from their fellow fighters from the other planets. And this young virgin was a prize indeed.

But the Venusians were sated at the moment. Their bellies were full of raw flesh and warming Bizant liquor. So they laughed and moved on, much to the Mercurian's surprise.

Seated at a cafe table nearby, Ron Kratnick was fighting with himself as he had never fought before; battling to hold his fury in check; striving to keep from leaping forward to tear the Mercurian's dome-shaped head from his shoulders. Bright in Ron's senses was the vision of what was going to happen to this girl. Apparently fresh from Earth, probably from America, she had no doubt been taken in one of the rapier-like raids of Darrien's forces and, according to the code of Darrien, she was fair loot of the blue Mercurian soldier.

Ron Kratnick writhed inwardly as he thought of Darrien—that arch-fiend of the universe; thought of the man's devilish cleverness in discovering the one thing which would make his interplanetary army fight like tigers possessed—the promise of Earth-women as their own property,

to be used as they saw fit. The girl, beyond doubt, would be better off dead.

But Ron held himself in by conjuring up the words of Blake Wentworth, Chief of Universal Intelligence: "You'll see some terrible things on Venus, Kratnick. Things done to our women and to captive soldiers that will make your blood boil and well-nigh unseat your reason. Your ability to control yourself will be the mark of your success or failure. When you see a girl raped or tortured, you've got to remember that you can do nothing for her—that your allegiance lies with the millions here on Earth—that your success will mean salvation for them. When you get to Venus, you've got to ignore everything except your prime objective."

"And what is that objective?" Ron had asked. He'd been called, completely unbriefed, from an assignment in Africa, and had come to Chicago with no idea whatever as to what his orders would contain.

BLAKE WENTWORTH, a highly capable, but sorely harrassed Intelligence Chief, had smiled bitterly. "I'll come to that, but first, let me give you the background." Wentworth's smile twisted into deeper bitterness as he snatched a cigarette from the tray on his desk. "Most of it you know, of course, so we'll just call it blowing off steam on my part. A man's got to sound off once in a while, or the stuff piles up inside him and cracks him up."

"I understand, sir."

"To a certain extent, maybe, but you can't know how I feel. You can't know that because you haven't been in the saddle—taking the abuse for the mistakes made by others."

There was sympathy in Ron's smile. "I'm a good listener, sir."

"The trouble with this planet, Kratnick, is that they were too cocky. The chosen people and all that silly rot. It came on gradually of course. With the most advanced brains in the universe we naturally were the superiors of the barbaric peoples we found on other planets. Our technical know-how was such that we had no trouble controlling them. And as time went on we considered ourselves as the paternal lords of the universe. The High Council members got up off their fat lard buckets and spouted off about how the blue Mercurians and the Venusians and the Martians loved us and looked to us for guidance."

This was evidently a subject close to Wentworth's spleen because he mashed his cigarette into a tray and his eyes blazed. "*Loved* us! Any fool with half an eye could see they hated our guts, envied us our advancements and drooled down their tusks at thoughts of getting us by the throats."

Ron had said nothing. There didn't seem to be anything to say. Wentworth scowled at his subordinate much as though he considered it his blame and then went on;

"Then we came up with that foul scheme for getting rid of our own trash and scum. Send them to Venus! Take our mobsters and degenerates and murderers and foist them off on the Venusians, and if the Venusians didn't like it—the hell with them! I remember when a pompous ass of a hypocrite named Lanson made the suggestion in the High Council. I can remember his very words!"

Wentworth had unconsciously burlesqued the voice and attitude of a typical well-fed politician: "Fellow citizens, why should the sweet air of earth be polluted by the breath of such as these? Let's send them to consort with their own kind—the sav-

ages in the red jungles of Venus. Let that steaming red planet fulfill the destiny for which it was created—let it be our penal colony."

The Intelligence Chief had stopped for lack of breath and Ron felt called upon to say something. "That was quite a while ago. I was just a kid then."

"Yes and I was still a young man when that groundwork for today's hellishness was laid. But I was in the Service when Darrien reared his rotten head and had to be dealt with."

"That I remember clearly," Ron said. "It was a big issue in the press. After his two attempts to overthrow the government I remember there was a great public clamor for his execution."

"I was a part of that clamor," Wentworth replied grimly. "I went before a Council committee and testified that regardless of Darrien's general rottenness, he had one of the greatest brains of all time; that by sending him to the penal colony of Venusia, we were sewing the seeds of our own possible destruction."

"But they sent him there anyhow."

WENTWORTH'S mood had changed from one of fire to one of moody defeat. "That's right. My words meant nothing and the Council went along with the sob-sisters and the so-called humanitarians. As a result, we lighted a time-bomb that's going off now. Darrien went to work immediately. Because certain men are criminals it doesn't follow that they have no brains. Darrien combed the cesspools of the universe and came up with brains by the bucketful. In ten years he built a war machine that has us with our backs to the wall. He built the most ferocious army ever conceived by the simple process of offering his soldiers our women as prizes."

It had been Ron's turn to frown. "But, sir, we aren't exactly helpless. We have four space fleets, any one of which is capable of blowing Venusia out into the void. I'm just an agent and I don't know what goes on on the inside, but I know that's what the public's howling about. They want to know why we haven't done just that—blown Darrien's rat's-nest to Kingdom Come. Your talk of our having our backs to the wall surprises me. I didn't know it was that bad."

"And neither does the public," Wentworth said grimly. "They blame the Council for not stopping the Earth-raids of Darrien's space ships. That's impossible unless we destroy Venusia."

"Then why don't we?"

"Because we can't."

It was equivalent to saying a man couldn't slap a fly on his own wrist. Ron allowed his expression to mirror surprise but he said nothing. Wentworth lit another cigarette and blew a cloud of smoke out through his nose. He then asked;

"Did you ever hear of the Clanton Space Mine?"

Ron shook his head and Wentworth smiled without humor. "If you had," Wentworth said, "it would mean a leak in Intelligence. Very few people know about it. If the information got out, there'd be panic in the streets."

He punched a button on his desk. A door opened at the far end of the room and a young man entered. The young man had about him, the impersonal air of the scientist. He crossed the room and stood by Wentworth's desk, staring at the Chief through calm, impersonal eyes. Wentworth closed his own eyes, evidently from sheer weariness.

"This is Corbett," he said. "One of our brilliant young brains. Corbett,

tell this man about the Clanton Space Mine."

While Wentworth appeared to sleep, the young scientist turned to Ron and spoke in a flat voice as though he were reading his words off a sheet of paper:

"The Clanton Space Mine can be compared, for the sake of understanding its function, to the explosive land mines used in ancient wars to blow up a road over which the enemy was passing. It is used for exactly the same purpose relative to a ship passing through a given area of space. It is an entirely invisible and unregistrable—"

Ron held up a hand. "What do you mean by unregistrable?"

"That its presence cannot be detected by any instruments—at least by any instruments we have been able to devise."

"I see."

"This mine consists of a ray and was discovered by Andrew Clanton—"

WENTWORTH was evidently not asleep because he waved an impatient hand without opening his eyes and said, "The hell with that. Everybody knows Clanton is a scaly-legged genius Darrien picked up in a Martian booze house. Tell him how they use the mine."

The youth went on: "To the best of our knowledge, the ray emanates from a central power plant located in the city of Venusia. It is projected so that it forms an umbrella over the city and about seven hundred square miles surrounding it. Functionally, this ray umbrella explodes any missile, lethal or otherwise, which comes down into its area of effectiveness. That area, so far as we can ascertain, has a depth of about a mile and lies about two hundred miles above the city and surrounding jungles."

"Remember that, Kratnick," Wentworth said, still without opening his eyes. "Seven good men died getting us the information."

There was a moment of silence, after which Wentworth said, "All right. Tell him the rest."

"We know also that there are entrances—tunnels so to speak, through this umbrella—uncontaminated passages in space through which Darrien's ship can enter and exit safely."

"But," Wentworth cut in, "we don't know where they are."

"Is that all, sir?" the young scientist asked. Wentworth nodded and then Corbett left the room.

"You know the score now, Kratnick," Wentworth said. "You know why Darrien's been holding us helpless. If we can't get through that umbrella with a bombardment squadron, these raids will continue until Earth is in panic and Darrien has recruited enough emboldened fighters from other planets to come down and annihilate us."

"I see why you call the situation serious," Ron said grimly. "What are my orders?"

"They're pretty much equivalent to suicide. I want you to go in and locate that projection plant and put it out of commission."

"Might I ask why I was picked for the job?"

"On your record," Wentworth hesitated, then spoke with an added grimness in his voice. "You're entitled to the truth, Kratnick. I told you seven men had already died in the project. They were all good, but that number includes Tanton, the Mercurian. I banked heavily on him but he's been gone for over four months now, and we're giving him up for dead. Anything Tanton couldn't crack is—well, almost impossible."

Ron was genuinely shocked upon

hearing this news. Tanton! The blue Mercurian had been practically a legend among the men of Intelligence. A master of over fifty languages, a graduate of Cambridge and the Harvard University of Advanced Theoretics, he was an unsurpassed nuclear physicist, a recognized composer and—this above all—an incurable adventurer. Why, it was an honor even to be considered for a project on which the great Tanton had failed!

"And there were six others beside Tanton?"

"Our best men right up the line. Three Earthmen, a Martian, and two Plutonians. It's practically a certainty they're all dead. Probably died in agony after being tortured. You may refuse the assignment if you wish."

"How do I get through the umbrella?"

"As a member of a Venusian raiding party. At times we get information as to where a raiding party intends to strike. Not very often but when we do, we use that information pretty grimly—we allow the raid to be made and use it to plant an agent in Venusia."

RON HAD understood instantly and his stomach tightened in protest at the seeming callousness. Darrien's forces were allowed to make off with a number of Earthlings in order that Intelligence could make a stab at winning this grim struggle. The unfortunates who were captured became hapless pawns in a game that was for keeps—a game where the stakes ran into the millions of lives.

"I know what you're thinking," Wentworth said. "I know it seems treacherous and rotten, but in this business you've got to weigh all the evils and condone the lightest in order to smash the heaviest."

"I understand," Ron said.

"The Raiders come in lots of about five hundred—usually only one ship—and are a mixture from every planet. Fortunately for us, Darrien has recruited a battalion of Earthmen—renegade exiles from our slums and cesspools. We've managed to capture a few of these and when the raid is staged, you're to infiltrate into the marauders. If necessary in order to carry it off—snatch yourself a woman captive and take her back to Venusia."

"I'll be entirely upon my own of course."

"Entirely. One of our space fleets is patrolling continuously off Venusia. We'll give you their wave length and you're to notify them if you succeed in destroying the projector."

Wentworth got to his feet and held out his hand. "And I promise you," he said grimly, "if you can do it, there'll be a big hole in Venus immediately thereafter."

"I'll try my best, sir," Ron said, and shook Wentworth's hand. He had left, terribly sorry for this man who had to sit at a desk with the weight of the whole terrible affair on his shoulders; this man who perhaps saw in his dreams the faces of Earthlings sacrificed in a plan he himself had had to devise.

"Good luck, Kratnick," Wentworth said.

"Thank you, sir," Ron replied.

Crouched in some bushes two nights later on the outskirts of a small town in Iowa, Ron had listened to the chirping of crickets in a nearby swamp and searched the dark skies for signs of a space-ship. He was clad in the tight gray britches and red tunic of Darrien's Earthmen Brigade. He wore the leather harness which distinguished those renegades, and he carried a zam-gun on his hip. In a supply packet at his belt were papers—genuine enough—identifying

him as Louis Diehl, a young St. Louis embezzler who had been exiled to Venusia, had returned as one of Darrien's raiders, and was now safely put away in the cell blocks in Chicago. Ron also wore, on his tunic, the tiny, almost imperceptible blue stitching which would identify him for what he was to any agent he chanced to meet.

But I won't meet any, he had told himself. They're all dead and I'm the eighth in line.

The red tail of a space-ship appeared in the sky. Ron crouched in the bushes and thought of Tanton.

CHAPTER II

TANTON'S greatest asset was a sixth sense which was uncanny in warning the blue Mercurian of danger. The moment he had set foot on Venusian soil, this sense rang a signal bell—told him point-blank that he was being watched.

Possessed of the azure, shell-skin of all Mercurians, he was incapable of facial expression, but his round eyes searched every face in the vicinity and finally settled upon two Venusian idlers in civilian garb who were lounging nearby in entirely too casual a manner. Had Tanton been capable of smiling, he would have done so now. What stupid ass had put these two dolts on his trail?

As he shuffled away from the Earth-raiding space ship after it had set down in its home port with its warriors and their booty, his mind went swiftly to work.

Starting with the knowledge that he was being watched, he began reasoning—building from that fact alone. First, it was obvious that he'd been spotted for what he was—an Earth Intelligence Agent. Therefore, his presence on the space-ship was known even before he left Earth with the raiders.

Armed with this knowledge, he moved into line with the raiders who were waiting to be numbered off before having their loot returned to them, and was struck by the fact that the two Venusians made no move to collar him. This gave him something more to build upon.

Obviously they had been told to watch him rather than to make an arrest. With this thought in view, he moved casually out of the line and drifted toward the gate of the enclosure, certain that no one would detain him.

The two Secret Service men drifted also toward the gate and followed Tanton up the street. Tanton, moving casually, and with no apparent destination, made it very easy for them. He avoided crowded streets and wandered up into the second tier of the city and stood for a time gazing up at the vast glass dome which covered Venusia. This dome, one of the greatest architectural feats in history, covered twenty-five square miles and shut out the vast heat of the flaming sun, thus turning Venusia into an air-conditioned city. Tanton gawked up at it like the most naive tourist, keeping careful sight on his spotters the while.

Absolutely certain of his facts now, he returned to the first tier, had a leisurely dinner, and then moved off toward a certain intersection at the west end of the city. He knew exactly where he was going, although he certainly did not appear to.

So, when he was quite ready, he shook off the two Secret Service men by the execution of one quick maneuver, redoubled his pace, and went straight to an ancient stone building where he found a door; a door cleverly camouflaged with dust, debris, and apparent disuse.

He knocked on the door, his knock a staccato of taps, obviously in code.

Then he lounged against the wall and awaited results.

Ten years prior to this time, he had gone through exactly the same movements and now—as then—the results were identical. After five minutes, a small window opened in the door-panel and a red, hostile eye peered out.

"I'm Tanton," the agent said. "I want to see the princess."

These words he had also used ten years before and now the same, hideous misshapen creature drew back the panel and croaked that he should enter.

WITHIN, Tanton found a small room, lit by a dusty levon tube which, barring deliberate or accidental damage, would burn forever. The incredibly filthy one-eyed creature who acted as door-keeper apparently recognized Tanton—acted in fact, as though ten years was hardly longer than ten minutes. The thing held out a scaly hand and gave with what was intended to be a grin. "One creda," it mouthed. "One creda for food."

Tanton laid a silver coin—a three-creda piece—into the hand and was rewarded with a frenzied little dance as the creature showed its appreciation. As Tanton crossed the room and went down a flight of stairs into the murky levels below, the creature was still registering happiness.

Tanton moved swiftly, entirely sure of himself. He was in a tunnel now, which stretched off into the distance, illuminated at irregular intervals by levon tubes, and with other tunnels giving off it every few hundred feet.

This was the famed Undercity of Venusia, a tunneled and catacombed area of unmapped crypts and death traps with a history so gory as to make even the Casbah of olden times pale into positive respectability.

Here, like slaving rats in the darkness, lived the vermin that had been rejected by the greater body of vermin exiled from Earth. In these passages dwelt the absolute dregs of the universe. Even members of Darrien's intrepid Secret Police had been known to resign rather than pursue a criminal into these deadly labyrinths.

A complete shadow-government was known to exist down here. The King of the Undercity was reputed to be a four-armed freak named Tza-Necros from the Planetoids, where evolution sometimes went wild and produced all manner of fantastic animal forms. This monster, possessed of a fine brain in his repulsive cask of a head, had created the shadow-empire himself and stood out successfully against even the ruthless Darrien who was said to have recoiled in horror at accounts of what went on in the Undercity. Twice Darrien had attempted to clean out the foul nest, too strong even for his stomach, and as a result, several thousand of his men now lay rotting in the dark tunnels below.

Tanton, however, seemed entirely at home. He moved with a sure step from one passage to another. He walked with zam-gun in hand and coldly alert when coming abreast of a cross-passage or to a place where the tunnel ceiling vaulted away and left room for balconies giving on the tunnel itself.

He was entirely conscious of the hungry eyes that followed his progress but he found that no creature barred his way.

The passages were taking him ever downward and it seemed, finally, that he must be at least a mile under the first tier of the city above him. Then he stopped abruptly, examined a wall on his right, and tapped it sharply with the butt of his zam-gun. He

waited for ten minutes, after which time, the routine at the first entrance, high above, was repeated, and again Tanton said;

"I want to see the Princess."

- There was no hesitancy on the part of this doorkeeper, a young Plutonian with a zam-gun of his own clutched in his fin-like hand.

The room inside was cleaner this time, and furnished with deeply upholstered chairs and a thick white yangskin rug.

THE AGENT stepped inside, showing no hesitancy nor even a ghost of caution. "Tell the Princess Tanton is here. Make it quick or I'll strip off your hide and push it down your throat."

This was evidently language the young guard understood, because, with a surly growl, he pocketed his gun and went out through another door.

A few moments later he returned, and Tanton was ushered through the inner door.

There was the sound of tinkling fountains, the music of rippling water, an artificial sky of lazy blue with white clouds floating by. A pathway of yellow brick led off through this amazing paradise, winding through rows of palm trees and banks of carefully tended flowers.

Tanton hesitated for a moment and then a voice called out to him: "Here Tanton—over here."

The blue Mercurian moved in that direction and came to a fern-rimmed pool out of which there arose a golden flame of a girl, completely naked, to stand on tip-toe in the lush grass and shake water from her long blonde hair.

Tanton sat down on a marble bench close by. As a sign of friendship, he removed his harness and dropped it in the grass.

"It's been a long time, Tanton," the girl said. "Throw me the towel there, and my robe."

Tanton picked up both articles and carried them to the girl. He stood by while she dried her brown body and slipped into a robe of fluffy gold-flecked material.

"You're in trouble of course," the girl said, laughing, "or you wouldn't have come."

"I'm in trouble—yes—but that's got nothing to do with it. Your calousness wounds me."

She laughed again as they made their way back to the bench. Tanton sat down and the girl dropped into the grass at his feet and sat looking up at him. "Tell me the news. What goes on on Earth and around the Universe?"

"He still keeps you cut off from things then?"

For a moment her mask of gayety slipped and Tanton could see the bleak unhappiness underneath. He had met this girl, long years before, in a New York cafe. She'd been a dancer then and when this paradise in the heart of Venusia's Undercity had been offered her—with certain strings attached—she'd taken it in lieu of a more strenuous life on Earth.

Margot had not changed one iota through the years. This, however, did not surprise Tanton. Rather, he'd have been surprised to find signs of age, what with Margot's access to the youth hormones developed in Kordo's Martian laboratories.

"Yes," the girl said, "I'm trapped here, but he's good to me. He's kept his end of the bargain and I've kept mine." She smiled and waved a hand in the direction of the pool and the glittering apartments beyond the garden. "What other girl has had what

I've had? I live in the most beautiful place in the Universe. My every wish is granted. I have fifty people to fulfill my slightest whim. I'm the luckiest girl ever born."

"You're trying hard to convince yourself of that, aren't you?" Tanton said. Margot dropped her eyes and Tanton went on: "Can anything compensate for the ordeals you go through with that four-armed monstrosity from the Planetoids?"

MARGOT laid a hand on Tanton's armored knee. Her eyes were still downcast. "Tza-Necros is good to me," she said. But she could not hide the hopelessness in her voice. "If it wasn't for him I'd be an ancient hag by now. I was over a hundred years old when I stopped counting. He got the hormones for me that give me eternal youth. I have complete mastery here in my buried Eden. He gives me what other girls only dream of having and all he asks in return is my—love."

"He hasn't got your love and he knows it. All he asks is your body."

Margot raised her head in a flare of defiance. "Well— isn't that little enough?"

Tanton put a hand under her chin and kept her from again lowering her head. He stared into her lovely face until she cast her eyes down. "Why don't you stop trying to kid an old friend," he said softly.

"It's *his* body, isn't it?" she whispered glancing down at her golden torso. "He's kept it young."

"Stop it!"

The girl held her poise for a few more moments. Then it cracked and she flung herself down to bury her face in Tanton's harness and burst into a frenzy of weeping.

Tanton sat motionless watching her. Possibly a little pity was mir-

rored in his round eyes, but more probably not. Tanton came of a realistic race and was not given to emotion.

When her sobs had diminished, he reached down and lifted her to the bench and sat her down beside him. "That's better," he said. "You've been a lot of things in your lifetime, Margot, but never a hypocrite. Now stop the blubbing and tell me about it."

She looked at him—dry-eyed now—her face oddly expressionless. "Damn you to hell-fire," she said, dully. "May God spit in your stupid eyes. I should have you killed and use your skull for a flower-pot. But—I can't."

"Of course you can't. One doesn't kill old friends. Besides, my skull would poison the flowers. Tell me—how long have you felt this way? How long have you been fed up?"

There was utter hopelessness in her voice. "I've always hated it, but for the last five years it's been—horrible. I can't seem to steel myself against it any more. Those—those four hairy arms—that slaver's mouth!" She lowered her head into her hands for a moment, then raised her head and there was a hard smile on her face.

"Sorry. I'm trapped here and there's no escape. But tell me about yourself. What news of the outside world?"

But Tanton's mind was not on world-events. He had no inclination whatever to turn himself into a walking newspaper. Instead, the wily Mercurian was evolving plans of his own. Already, his brain was busy building a ladder of intrigue and double-dealing up which he could climb to his objective—the destruction of Darrien's ray-projector. He was no lily-white crusader, this Mercurian. He had learned his business in a hard school and it wasn't by chance that

he was one of the cleverest agents in Earth's employ. His one saving grace was utter loyalty to whatever cause he served. His reason for serving a cause was entirely a selfish one—for example he was an Earth Intelligence agent because it was the most lucrative proposition he could find for his peculiar talents.

Nor was there any high-mindedness in the loyalty he gave after casting his lot with a particular group. It was simply a matter of common-sense and good business. An untrustworthy agent would soon find himself out of a job, whereas a loyal one increased his reputation and, it followed, his monetary value.

SO NOW, with a structure of intrigue forming in his mind, he laid his first groundwork. "Have you ever taken a lover?" he asked. "Some man a trifle more palatable than our four-armed friend?"

Margot shook her head. "No. I've lived up to my part of the bargain. It's the last shred of decency left to me."

"I'm sorry you feel that way," Tanton said. "Any man in Venusia would sell his soul for two hours with you."

"That may be true," Margot said without ostentation, "but it makes no difference."

"If you'd be a little more reasonable, I think I could get you out of here. Back to earth where you'd be safe from Tza-Necros."

The shot, fired at the girl when her guard was down, brought quick blood. She grasped Tanton's hand. "You—you could get me out?" In her eyes was wild entreaty. Then she caught herself and her shoulders drooped. "You talk foolishness, my friend."

"You should know me better than that. I don't babble for the sake of

bearing my own voice. I said I could get you out and I can—safely.”

“But what would my taking a lover have to do with it?”

Tanton did not answer for a moment. His mind raced up the line of Darrien's bully boys until he came to Lars Valcan, head of the grim and bloody Secret Service. This branch of officialdom was vested with the duty of counteracting espionage and ferreting out dissenters in very form. Also with the protection of government installations. Beyond doubt Valcan would know the location of the ray-projector.

“Would you be willing to spend a half hour with Lars Valcan?” Tanton asked. “That is if I could in turn promise you safe passage back to Earth?”

“How would that help?”

“It's merely a matter of enlisting powerful friends,” Tanton lied glibly. “Valcan wouldn't help us for any amount of money. But for the privilege of holding you in his arms. To be able to talk of it later—”

Margot, even in her degradation, had the grace to flush.

“In less than three months you could be walking the streets of New York City,” Tanton said. “Riding across the good green land—breathing Earth air and bathing in the blessed sunlight.”

Even then, Tanton knew he'd won. Even before Margot said, “I'll try it.” Then, even more bitterly. “I guess I'm desperate enough to try anything.”

Swiftly, Tanton followed up his advantage. “I'll be back in three hours at the most,” he said. “Send orders to all entrances that I'm to be admitted no matter who is with me. And you be waiting in the garden.”

While talking, he had been snapping his harness on. Now he turned away and left as he had come, quit-

ting the hidden paradise for the foul passages beyond. A short time later he was across the city, standing in front of a tall marble building which housed the offices of the Secret Police. He was entirely alone, his spot- ters not having picked him up after his exit from the Undercity.

HIS STRODE boldly up the well-worn steps and into the lobby where a young Venusian with a built-in scowl and a zam-gun on either hip barred his way.

“I want to see Lars Valcan,” he said. “Take me to him.”

“You must be as stupid as you look,” the Venusian snarled. “No one sees Lars Valcan—except maybe over the lip of a roasting pit.”

“I'll see him. Tell him that Tanton, Intelligence agent from Earth wants an interview. And jump to it or you'll fry on a griddle before sundown.”

The guard's mouth dropped open. Here was something utterly inconceivable. It couldn't be a joke because jokes weren't perpetrated within the walls of the Secret Police Building. Here all was grimness and stark reality. The guard walked slowly away, backwards, his eyes still on Tanton. The guard waved a hand and immediately four uniformed soldiers moved in from various locations about the lobby and formed a square around Tanton. The agent ignored them.

The guard backed up to a counter behind which two other officials were seated. He spoke to them in a low voice over his shoulder. They came close to the counter, leaned over, and the three held a hurried conference, after which one of the officials snapped a switch and spoke into a mouthpiece.

After a few moments he got up and came around into the lobby to-

ward Tanton. "This way," he said sharply.

With the four-man guard still in entourage, Tanton was escorted to a small room and placed before a visiplate. There was a whining sound and the plate lit up to reveal a heavy-set, handsome Earthman seated at a desk. The man, frowning, remained silent.

"Greetings, Valcan," Tanton said easily. "When your two spotters got careless and lost me, I felt slighted. I'm certainly more important than that. I came to make inquiries and, incidentally, to do you a service."

The paths of these two had crossed before and Lars Valcan had no reason to love Tanton. But Tanton knew his man. He knew that Valcan, sure of his own position, would grant him an interview out of curiosity if nothing more. An interview was all Tanton asked.

"Send him up," Valcan growled and the plate went dead.

Tanton entered Valcan's office, threw his harness on the floor and took a chair beside the Secret Service Chief's desk. He was as much at ease as he would have been in the office of his own chief on Earth.

"Even though I'm going to have you tortured to death," Valcan said, "I've still got to admire your nerve—walking in here like this."

"I said I was here to do you a service."

Valcan smiled coldly. "How stupid do you think we are, Tanton? Let me tell you a little about yourself. You infiltrated into a party of our raiders near a small town in Maryland. You used the papers of a soldier, an Earthman, named Brad Wilcox who was captured on an earlier raid—"

"I threw the papers away before I boarded the space-ship," Tanton cut in. "I knew a man of your caliber

wouldn't be fooled so easily."

"Don't interrupt me. Two men were put on you the moment you stepped on Venusian soil."

"And they lost me two hours later."

"Do you know why you weren't picked up? Do you know why all the Earth Intelligence agents who came before you weren't picked up until we were quite ready?"

"Of course. Darrien wants Earth to keep on sending agents until they run onto something. The S. S. lets them wander about as they please. It's Darrien's method of stalling for time. And do you know where I went after I shook off your spotters?"

"No," Valcan growled.

"I went down into the Undercity to report to my boss—to deliver him some documents from New York."

VALCAN showed genuine surprise. "Your boss! Are you trying to make me believe you're working for Tza-Necros?"

"Of course I am, and I don't care whether you believe it or not—you will later. I got stranded in New York on an assignment when Earth suspended all flights to Venus. I had to get back, so what better way was there than to sign up with Earth Intelligence in order to get a ride?"

Valcan was no fool but his brain was not in the same league with that of Tanton. He smiled coldly and asked the question Tanton was waiting for. "Why did you have to join Intelligence to board one of our ships? You've slipped up, my friend."

"Your raids weren't exactly broadcast beforehand," Tanton answered, suavely. "Earth Intelligence was getting information on a few of your landings and I had to join up in order to locate one of your ships. Any fool should be able to figure that out."

If Tanton had been capable of smiling, he'd have done so now at Valcan's dark discomfiture. However, he allowed the Secret Service Chief no time for a reply.

"But that's not important. The important thing is that I've got a proposition for you for Tza-Necros. The old boy's scared stiff."

Valcan was entirely disarmed by surprise and interest. "Tza-Necros? Scared of what?"

Calmly, Tanton threw his bombshell. "That new death-ray Clanton invented. The one Darrien's going to use to clean out every living thing in the Undercity. Tza-Necros bought some information about it from a professional informer and he's in a panic. I understand Clanton can turn it into the underground tunnels and annihilate all life in twenty-four hours. That's true isn't it?"

Valcan was thinking fast but still the clever Mercurian agent was able to follow the process of that thinking almost as easily as though Valcan had put it into words.

Up to this point, Valcan had been wondering whether or not Tanton had been lying about not being an Earth-Intelligence agent. Now, so long as he had Tanton in his power, the point no longer mattered. It was overshadowed by the new information.

Granting that Tanton *was* working for Tza-Necros, it was both logical and possible that some sharp-witted informer had sold the Undercity dictator some silly rumors about the Clanton Space Mine. The secret was closely guarded and not one man in ten thousand knew the location, there in Venusia, of the ray-projector. But rumors got about and it was entirely possible the thing had been rumored as a device to clean out the Undercity.

On the strength of this, and by

some somewhat faulty reasoning, Valcan decided Tanton was also in the dark as to the true nature of the device.

"You mentioned a proposition," Valcan said coldly.

Tanton chuckled inwardly. "He'll give you a million credas in gold for the location of the ray projector."

"In other words, he takes me for a traitor."

Tanton sighed. "I didn't think you'd do it for mere gold," he said, "and neither did Tza-Necros. So he'll throw in Margot. That will give you an idea of how scared the old boy is."

"Then Margot really exists?" The golden girl who lived in an Eden under Venusia, was in the realm of legend. Tales of her beauty and her ability to please her four-armed lord, were legion, but no one was sure she was other than the dream of some hopped-up story teller.

"Of course she exists. I've seen her myself. If you agree, I'm to take you down into the Undercity and show you the place Tza-Necros built for her down there. You can visit her down there or bring her out, whichever you choose."

Sore temptation beset Valcan just as Tanton knew it would. Valcan's reasoning ran thus. What did it matter if Tza-Necros knew the location of the ray-projector? Once, he, Valcan, got the money and the fabulous Margot, he could see that Tza-Necros was acquainted with the true facts—that the projector in reality guarded Venusia from Earth's space-ships, and thus guarded, also, Tza-Necros' Undercity.

But Valcan brought himself up sharply. It was absurd; entirely absurd. But then again—Margot. The golden legend of the Undercity. Valcan yearned for the prestige that would go with acquiring her for him-

self—from parading her in the smart eating and drinking places of Venusia. But—

Abruptly, Valcan pressed a button on his desk. Three heavily armed guards entered the room. Valcan pointed at the blue Mercurian agent.

"Put him in a cell," he snapped. "I'll make out the execution orders for early tomorrow morning."

Tanton was lead away, and at that moment his faith in his own powers fell to zero.

CHAPTER III

AS RON KRATNICK watched the dark skies over Iowa, the fiery tail he'd observed, brightened, and a silver ship rocketed down out of space.

Immediately lights began flashing on in the village nearby; but not before the great shining globe from Venus, coming in a long, graceful sweep, had set down on the meadowland of Iowa.

Ramps shot out of the globe; doors opened automatically, and Darrien's hordes spewed forth. They were as motley a collection of demons as Ron had ever seen gathered in one place. First came a contingent of Darrien's pride—the evil, black-tailed Venusian fighting men, each carrying a zam-gun and armed also with the death-sting, swift and terrible, embedded at the end of those whipping, black posterior formations. Then came the blue Mercurian devils, the eyes in their shell-covered faces alight at the prospect of Earth women's bodies. Came the ferocious Martian hillmen, thirsting for pillage and loot.

Like an ocean wave they frothed across the level ground full of the weird, eerie cries of other planets. The wave engulfed Ron and he rose up and went with it, became a part

of it, and he told himself: Now I'm a renegade. I want a share of the loot Darrien promised me; my share of white Earth-flesh. Think the part and I can better act it.

The invaders were smashing into houses now. There were terrified Earth-screams added to the din, as the scene took on the horrible proportions of something straight out of hell. Appalled at the sight, Ron found himself frozen while the action milled about him. From the house in front of which he stood, three persons came running; a very old man, a middle-aged woman and a girl of perhaps eighteen, fleeing from a Martian hillman.

The Martian passed the elder two in one long stride and caught the terrorized girl by the arm. In desperation, the elder woman struck out at him only to go down, her skull crushed by the butt of the Martian's zam-gun. The old man stumbled and went headlong to receive a kick from the Martian which doubled him up in agony.

Ron's stomach was revolting at the scene around him; women and girls dragged, partially clad or entirely naked, from houses; dragged by arms, legs, or hair; some thrown over the shoulders of the raiders to scream and twist and writhe helplessly.

I can't stand much of this, Ron told himself through gritted teeth. But I've got to stand it! Hold myself in!

Then, at sight of two Venusians on down the street fighting over a cowering blonde girl, Ron realized there was something he could do—a small thing but it would keep him from going mad and blowing the whole deadly-important assignment.

He leaped at a Martian hillman who now had a shrieking girl in his arms and knocked him spinning with one blow of his right fist. The sur-

prised Martian went down, only to come up with a roar of rage, mouthing again and again the word that could be heard from all directions: "Mine—mine—mine!"

THE GIRL had fallen too and Ron caught her by the wrist as the Martian charged in, clawing for his zam-gun. Ron flung the girl behind him where she crouched, sobbing, with her face in her hands. He took the Martian's head-on charge on his lowered right shoulder. He heaved, fiercely happy at the feeling of impact, and hurled the hillman backward.

"Mine! Mine!" Ron shouted into the hillman's tusked mouth and jammed his zam-gun into the creature's gut. He snapped the switch and a great hole appeared in the hillman—a round, bloodless hole from which the Martian's bowels, heart and lungs had vanished into a sharp crackle of atomized dust. The Martian's lips came back off slavering teeth. He was dead but the horrible jaws still worked as he melted to the ground.

Ron whirled and slugged out at a blue Mercurian who was reaching for his nightgown-clad prize. The Mercurian snarled in protest, nursing the split shell on his right cheek. But he was not inclined to argue further and went hulking off in search of other loot.

Ron lifted the girl over his shoulder. As he carried her along he could feel her breasts and the agonized pounding of her heart against his neck. "Mine! Mine," he shouted in triumph as he passed other raiders intent upon their work. And it seemed to him that his smile must have resembled a leering, grinning skull.

The raid was in its final stages now. A horn had been sounded from

the space ship and the raiders were streaming back toward the meadow. Some with live loot—others who had to be content with inanimate plunder—and some with empty hands.

But back they went because life, after all, was the dearest thing, and to be left behind meant certain death.

Ron lagged behind the streaming mob, snarling at the envious, empty-handed raiders. He allowed them to pass him by as he swung in a circle toward the comparative gloom of the bushes. With only a few raiders left to board the waiting ship, Ron set the girl on her feet, held her erect when she would have slipped down in heap.

"Run," he gritted in her ear. "Off that way into the darkness! For God's sake—*run!*"

The stricken girl did not understand at first. Then she took a couple of faltering steps, tangled one foot in her torn nightgown, and went down, moaning.

Glancing desperately around, Ron yanked her to her feet. "Don't you understand me? Run!" With a sweep of his hand he tore away the entangling nightgown, leaving her stark naked. He jammed the garment into her hands and whispered, "Put it on later, but get away from here!" He gave her sharp slap on her bare bottom and had the satisfaction of seeing her come to life and turn into a blurred white streak to disappear into the gloom.

Whirling around, Ron dived for the space ship where only one ramp was still down. He scrambled up the ramp and got inside just as the door swung to and thudded into the heavy rubber jambs, leaving a smooth, unmarred surface on the outer shell of the ship.

Two Venusians pushed him aside and locked the inner door. Ron turned away quickly, hiding his face

as much as possible, but it was evident the Venusians were paying him no attention. He hurried up the inner ramp, faced now with the first important hurdle of the assignment. He was impersonating a genuine Earth renegade. His papers were in order, but that renegade had not been aboard this ship at the start of its journey. For all Intelligence knew, its previous seven agents may have been spotted for what they were immediately upon boarding the raider's space ships. The trip to Venus was something more than a suburban jaunt and while there was probably no check made until the ship reached its port, a masquerader could be turned up by the men themselves. Associations were made on a trip of this sort. Men made friends with other men and were known. An unknown man would be a subject for investigation.

RON HAD a plan to at least partially overcome this danger. From aforeknowledge, he knew the customs followed on such occasions as this. He knew the men were not allowed access to their booty during the flight back to Venus; at least not to the live booty.

The captive women were segregated in a separate compartment to be turned over to the soldiers upon arrival. This forestalled possible fights and dead-struggles over the prizes enroute. It also allowed the officers much pleasure at their leisure. Things happened to the more desirable captives on the trip back—things Ron didn't dare think about.

And too the soldiers themselves were segregated in small groups for the better handling thereof. Although it was not mandatory, the men congregated with their own kind. Martians usually traveled with Martians. The Venusians hung together and the

Earth renegades, the most clannish of all, usually congregated by themselves. So Ron had decided to avoid the Earthmen who would no doubt turn him up as an interloper, and select other companions for his trip to Venusia.

He picked the most vicious of them all—the black-tailed Venusian warriors themselves. He followed a group of these into a compartment, tossed his harness on a bunk and prepared to snarl down any other claimant.

There were roughly twenty-five Venusians in the group, he estimated. Also he saw one Martian and a single Plutonian. The Martian, his tusks still bloody from the raid, took the bunk next to Ron and sat down to wind a piece of dirty cloth around a small ankle-wound.

Ron stretched out in his bunk, closed his eyes and took a slow, deep breath. He had completed the first leg of his assignment. The ship was already in motion and soon there would be food for the victorious warriors. Then the Venusians would pile into their bunks and put themselves into a dream-state, a drug-induced stupor, for which purpose each Venusian carried a small bag of dried leaves from the Jadie bush—that evil, red vegetation which could be found only in the stifling Venusian jungles.

I wonder if I'll ever get there? Ron thought. I wonder how soon some alert officer will spot me?

I wonder how long I'll live?

When he finally went to sleep it was with the feeling that he would be yanked at any minute from his bunk and made to face a blinding light, while voices barked questions into his ears and heavy fists maimed him for not answering.

But he slept on and awakened to find food on the table. The Martian and the Plutonian were seated at the

table. They'd just finished eating and were conversing in some outer planet language unfamiliar to Ron.

At the other end of the table a single Venusian was gnawing on a leg of beef, cracking the bone with his strong teeth to get at the marrow inside. As Ron watched, the Venusian growled to himself and returned to his bunk.

Ron got up and went to the table. The two from alien planets stopped talking and eyed him with hostility. He ignored them, filled a plate and satisfied his appetite.

JUST AS he was finishing his meal, the door opened and a Venusian entered. The man wore the distinctive harness of a high-ranking officer. He walked straight to the table and stood looking down at Ron. He remained silent as Ron tensed his muscles for what appeared to be a pay-off. So this was what had happened to the other Intelligence men. Spotted even before they left Earth, they had each been jetted away to quick death in high space.

But the Venusian officer remained silent and made no motion toward Ron. He stood for a full minute staring down at Ron. Then he grinned—a knowing, wolfish grin—and went out as he had come.

Reaction set in and Ron felt suddenly weak. The Martian and the Plutonian, who had sat silent, their eyes on the tableau, now returned to their conversation. Ron got up from the table and went back to his bunk.

The episode left him bewildered. What lay behind it? He could have sworn the Venusian officer knew him for what he was. Yet the man had gone calmly about his business. Was it a cat and mouse game? Knowing they had Ron helpless, were they toying with him? Ron was inclined to doubt this. It wasn't the way Venu-

sians did business. One thing was certain to Ron, however. He would never reach Venusia alive.

At least a dozen times during the trip, Ron was clinically—but silently inspected by men from the officers' quarters. Each time he prepared for the end and was set to do battle. But each time nothing transpired in the way of action. It was a bewildering thing and wore his nerves to raw edges. By the time the ship was ready to set down in its home berth he was as tense as a steel wire.

But again, nothing happened. He quitted the ship and mixed with the boisterous raiders in the bull-pen prior to numbering off. No one, apparently, was paying him any attention whatever.

Now was the time, he decided. Certainly he wasn't going to stand around waiting for death. He moved casually toward a ramp, expecting, any moment, to be apprehended or shot down in his tracks.

No one barred his way. He achieved the enclosure beyond the ramp and mixed in with the Venusian citizens who were there to welcome the raiders home and feast their eyes on the white captives who would soon be led from the ship.

Ron moved through the crowd and toward the exit. He found no one there to bar his way, and drifted out into the street. Now he increased his pace and quick elation surged through him. Apparently it had all been his imagination!

Then he discovered the two Venusians on his trail and realized the reverse was true. He had been spotted. He was definitely known as an Intelligence agent.

But what was the game? This question entered his mind after he had spent an hour moving around the city and knew, beyond doubt, that

the men were following him. Did they expect him to lead them to someone? If so, to whom?

He debated the wisdom of attempting to elude them at this point or to wait for a more favorable opportunity. If he tried to get away from them and failed, they might arrest him then and there.

Mulling this question over in his mind, he found himself passing a sidewalk cafe on the first tier of a busy street. He dropped into a chair and saw his two spotters immediately stop and lean casually against a wall some fifty yards away.

When the waiter came, Ron ordered a bottle of Bizant liquor and drank a full glass without stopping. He had not slept well on the trip in from Earth, nor had had much of an appetite and the liquor tightened his already raw nerves.

His whole being writhed for action. He was tired of the cat and mouse game. As a result of the liquor, he had a mighty urge to end this thing for good and all.

In short, he stopped thinking like an Intelligence agent, and when the blue Mercurian came along, dragging the white Earth-girl by a rope, Ron had to fight with himself as he'd never fought before. His liquor-heated rage flared brightly and he gripped the table-edge with both hands until his knuckles were white.

He sat with his teeth locked tight together as he watched the two Venusian soldiers paw the girl with obscene gestures. He waited for the explosion that didn't come.

Then, as the trouble passed over, and the blue Mercurian jerked cruelly at the rope, Ron lost his battle. He was out of his chair like a projectile. The hell with the assignment! The hell with everything. He had to twist off the arrogant head of that blue Mercurian or go completely berserk.

He heard a voice—his own—yelling, "You turtle-faced son-of-a-bitch! Leggo that rope!" as he dived straight at the blue man.

CHAPTER IV

TANTON, lying in comfort on the stone floor of his cell, was inclined to be philosophical about the whole thing. He had no fear of death, nor did he have any regrets. During all the years he'd played at his dangerous game, he'd known that, someday, this would happen. His wily intrigues, practiced to gain his own ends on practically every inhabitable planet, had always been successful. But he'd known that, someday, one would miss, and that he would be finished.

He was aware of his mistake in this case. He'd misjudged the Secret Service chief. The structure of his intrigue had been basically sound except for one flaw. He'd banked too strongly on Valcan's lust for the beautiful Margot—upon his greed for the prestige of acquiring her.

This he could only shrug off as a mistake and forget about it. It did irk him somewhat that he'd be marked in Earth Intelligence offices as having failed on an assignment. But that too was of no great importance. He wouldn't be around long to suffer the humiliation.

With this thought in mind, he went to sleep.

The following morning he was awake to hear footsteps in the hall. The roasting pit, no doubt, was now at the required high temperature. The footsteps stopped and the door opened.

But it was only a guard bearing a tray of food and a flacon of water. The guard set the food down and retired. Evidently, Tanton decided, they were going to feed him before roasting him. For this he was grate-

ful and set to work upon the tray with gusto.

After eating, he went back to sleep. When he awoke the small window, high in his cell, was black. Night had come. The day of his execution had passed and he was still alive.

This surprised him. But as day after day passed in monotonous regularity and he saw no one but the silent guard with tray and flacon, his wonder increased with the time.

What had gone wrong? Then, suddenly, he knew and his faith in his own abilities shot sky-high. He hadn't failed. Not by any means, and he could sense the struggle going on in Valcan's mind—analyze it as accurately as though Valcan had come down to tell him about it.

The Secret Service chief was fighting between greed and fear. In the beginning, fear had been the stronger. Because of this he'd thrown Tanton into a cell, but the greed stayed his fingers, day after day, from signing the death warrant.

Tanton took a new lease on life and began wondering how long Valcan would hold out. The weeks became months and the months became four, with Tanton waxing fat and lazy in his cell.

It must be quite a battle, he told himself. I wonder how long he can hold out? The next morning there were footsteps in the hall as usual but more brisk now, with a sound of more positive authority.

It was Valcan.

HE ENTERED the cell and stood down at Tanton who was stretched full length upon the floor. "It's been a long time," Tanton said.

"I couldn't make up my mind. I'm still not convinced that—"

"But you're ready to go ahead with it?"

Valcan glanced uneasily at the

door, then continued speaking in a lower voice. "It's not as easy as you think. Especially now that you've been committed to jail. The best I can do is to see that you escape. I'll give your guard an order to show you an escape-route—a passage to the second tier of the street behind the building. Then, after you've escaped, I'll come down and kill him for negligence of duty."

"A clever procedure," Tanton said, and was entirely sincere about it. He'd been guilty of equally treacherous deeds more than once in his career.

"But once you're beyond the walls, you'll have to fend for yourself. I'll have to put every man on the alert. And if you're captured you won't live long enough to make any accusations against me."

"Don't worry," Tanton said, cheerfully. "I'm not in the habit of getting caught."

"Then where can I meet you after you're clear?"

"What time is it?"

"A little after the thirteenth hour."

"Meet me, at the eighteenth hour, on the first tier of Darrien Promenade and a small street called Antor. And come alone. Otherwise we will not be admitted to the Undercity."

Valcan was silent for a moment before he said. "I believe you said I could bring Margot out of the Undercity with me. Otherwise—"

"That will be your privilege. And you can also bring the million credas out."

"That is of no consequence. I already have well over ten million credas."

Tanton got to his feet. "Why don't you give me the location of the ray projector now?" he suggested. "It might save time, and will put Tzanecros into a good mood to receive you."

"Do you think I'm a fool?"

"I was hoping you were, but I guess I'm wrong," Tanton said. "When will the guard come?"

"Within an hour," Valcan said. "And remember, you'll have not more than five minutes before the alarm will be sounded. Goodbye now—I hope we meet again."

"At the Promenade and Antor Street. The eighteenth hour."

Fifteen minutes later, Tanton was standing alone in the small alley behind the prison. Another five minutes and Valcan had personally slain Tanton's guard and had sounded the alarm for the agent's recapture.

Tanton moved swiftly in the few minutes of grace, but not swiftly enough. Before he could shoulder his way into a trans-city jet car, a master-switch was thrown at Secret Service Headquarters and every pilot obeyed the red signal to stop his car. A cordon was thrown around a mile-square area with the prison as its center. With a smoothness indicating long practice, the Service went into action, checking people out of the area, one by one, through turnstiles and ordering them not to return until the Service quitted the restricted area.

Tanton was neatly trapped.

And he knew what his fate would be if he were captured. Quick death. Beyond doubt the Service men had been ordered to shoot him down instantly upon identification.

PAUSING on a side street to take his bearings, Tanton wracked his brain for a way out. But, while infinitely clever, he was not given to working miracles. His lightning brain reviewed the situation and gave a negative report. There was no way out. All the civilians in the area would be checked at the exits. Then the square mile would be combed by

men walking elbow to elbow. No escape.

Tanton stepped back into a doorway as footsteps sounded on the deserted street. A moment later a lumbering giant of a man, a Martian, came around the corner and moved in Tanton's direction. Pushing his head into view, Tanton saw, first the Martian, and then the practically naked Earth-girl he was dragging along by means of a rope around the latter's slim waist.

Tanton catalogued the girl instantly. Obviously an American, she was no doubt from some town recently raided by the Venusians. The droop of her smooth shoulders and the fear and utter hopelessness in her eyes, marked her for what she was. Loot. A girl taken on a raid by the Martian, and now his property to do with as he saw fit.

Another point impressed Tanton. This Martian was evidently looking for a place of seclusion—some deserted nook or alleyway, where he could examine his prize in privacy.

Then a plan for salvation—his own salvation—was born in Tanton's mind. Had he been able to smile, he would have done so as he stepped from the doorway and moved toward the Martian and the captive girl.

The Martian, immediately suspicious, yanked the girl roughly forward and pushed her behind him as he scowled at Tanton. The latter walked up, a picture of innocent interest, and craned his neck to peer around the Martian. He noted, in doing so, the red welt of the rope completely encircling the waist of the lush Earth-girl.

"A rare prize," Tanton said. "Is she for sale? I'll pay two hundred credas gold. A hundred and fifty platinum."

"Mine," the Martian snarled. "I took her in a raid."

"Of course she's yours, but I want to buy her. I'll pay."

The Martian considered for a moment. "I'll sell, but not now. Two days from now I'll return to this spot with her at the same time. Then I'll sell."

Tanton considered in turn, but the Martian had no idea what was in the Mercurian's mind. He had no credas on his person and no intention of buying the girl. Also he had no weapon. Hence the seeming thought on the Martian's proposition which was in reality, a ruse to get a trifle closer to the man—close enough to jerk the zam-gun from his harness.

Finally, Tanton shook his head. "No. I want her now—not after you've spoiled her. I'm not interested in second-hand goods. "I'll pay three hundred—gold."

The Martian did what Tanton had hoped he would do—turned his head to look appraisingly at the girl and consider whether he could find more pleasure with the money in some Venusian booze and flesh house, than with this slim brown Earth-virgin.

He turned his head just enough for Tanton's arm to streak out and come back gripping the raider's zam-gun. The Martian whirled in alarm but his brain probably hadn't even time to form the fear-pattern because—in an instant—his head was gone, charred into a thimbleful of black crust by the ray from the zam-gun.

AS THE big body melted to the pavement, Tanton snatched the rope from the lifeless hand and said to the cowering girl; "You're mine now. See that you come along peacefully and keep your mouth shut. Otherwise I'll sell you in the first flesh house I come to."

The girl whimpered and lowered her head in complete defeat.

A few minutes later, Tanton, now

apparently half-drunk, weaved his way toward one of the turnstiles set up by the Secret Service. He was shouting a ribald Mercurian drinking song and seemed surprised and bewildered upon finding a barricade.

"What's this?" he demanded of a young Service Lieutenant. "Who stands in the way of a soldier of Darrien? One side or I'll fry you."

The lieutenant's eyes were on the Earth-girl as Tanton had anticipated. To the young Venusian, Tanton was obviously a triumphant and most fortunate raider who was parading his booty for all to see. Pulling his hot eyes away from the girl, and scarcely looking at Tanton, the lieutenant glanced at the record sheet in his hand and waved Tanton through. As the girl followed, her arms folded to cover a portion of her nudity, she felt the hand of the lieutenant brush casually over her body. She shivered and responded to the jerk of the rope in Tanton's hand. "Come on, girl," Tanton said. "No one bars the way of an Earth-raider."

Tanton gave the girl no rest as he hurried across the city. He was past the main danger now, but the whole Service had been alerted and he would possibly be challenged at any moment, though—thanks to his masquerade—it was doubtful.

He kept to the direct thoroughfare on the first tier, considering audacity to be a good thing and had no trouble until he was within a quarter-mile of his goal—the nearest entrance to the Undercity of which he had knowledge.

Thus, with safety almost in his grasp, he was intercepted by two swaggering Venusian fighters. Their lustful eyes brightened at sight of the girl and, as Tanton hauled her past them, their hands were upon her.

Here was possible trouble and it

had to be met head-on. Tanton snarled as he yanked the girl toward him. "Mine", he spat, and gripped the butt of his zam-gun.

But the reaction of the Venusians was not as Tanton expected. They were in an amiable mood—rare for Venusians—and they laughed good naturedly as they moved on. Tanton breathed a sigh of relief. A brawl at this point would have brought inquiries—inquiries fatal to Tanton.

Then, just as he was resuming his course, trouble sprang at him from another quarter. This in the form of an apparently demented Earthman—a handsome young man in the harness of Darrien's raiders, who dived straight at Tanton's throat from a cafe table nearby.

Tanton, unable to draw his gun, whirled to meet the charge and went down under the fury of the mad assault. He heard a thundering voice in his ear:

"You turtle-faced son-of-a-bitch! Leggo that rope."

Tanton's head cracked hard against the pavement but that bothered him not at all. His skull could not have been split with a hand axe, so thick and hard was its shell-covering.

But he had a vulnerable point at his neck and the Earthman evidently knew this because he had Tanton's head gripped in both hands and was twisting it. Too much of this and the head would snap off at the base of the neck. Then the crazy Earthman could lift it away like a disconnected door knob.

TANTON strained—heaved upward—and his eyes came into line with the Earthman's chest. There, almost invisible, was the faint blue stitching which marked him for what he was—an Earth Intelligence Agent.

It flashed swiftly through Tanton's mind that this man was a disgrace to his planet. He'd lost his head while on an assignment.

But that did not change the fact that Tanton was also close to losing his own head. He jerked the Earthman close to him and gritted. "Stop it you fool! Look at my tunic! I'm an agent myself. My name is Tanton!"

His words pierced the Earthman's brain and quieted the maniacal fury of his attack. His expression changed to one of bewilderment as he loosed his hold on Tanton's tortured head.

"We've got to get away from here quick," Tanton hissed. "The Service men will haul us to jail and we'll be lost. A crowd is gathering already."

Ron Kratnick saw that this was true. Passers-by had stopped to watch the fight and the walk was becoming crowded.

"I'll throw you off," Tanton whispered. "Then I'll get up and run with the girl. You follow us until you see me turn into an alley but don't catch up with us till then."

With this, the blue Mercurian executed a mighty heave, sending Ron Kratnick rolling into the gutter. Immediately, Ron doubled up as though in agony, as though a hidden blow had paralyzed him.

The Mercurian was on his feet instantly to gallop off down the street, dragging the whimpering girl behind him.

After a reasonable time, Ron got to his feet and ran after the fleeing Mercurian.

Ahead with the girl, Tanton found he could not travel very fast. The girl was bare-footed and was not used to running full-tilt through city streets. Then Tanton glanced back and found that the Earthman had developed a limp which retarded his

progress. Thus the distance between them remained pretty much unchanged.

The second time he glanced back, Tanton saw something else. Two Venusians, obviously spotters who had been put on the Earthman's trail, had recovered from their surprise at the swift turn of events and were now in pursuit. Fortunately Venusians were slow of foot, but even so, the distance between them and the earthman was fast diminishing. Tanton was happy to see that the Venusians had not drawn their weapons. Evidently they felt well able to catch the Earthman alive.

Tanton pulled cruelly on the rope, forcing the Earth-girl to increased speed and it was with a feeling of relief that he came to the alley toward which he'd been running. He pulled the girl into the narrow passageway, then pushed his head around the edge of the building and looked back down the street.

The Earthman's limp had magically vanished and he was kiting up the street at a speed which caused the Venusians to claw for their zam-guns.

Then the Earthman was braking his speed to turn and slip into the alleyway past Tanton.

"What now?" Ron asked, gasping for breath.

"The spotters," Tanton said, his zam-gun already in his hand. "You take the short one. I'll cut the tall one in two."

AS THEY approached and hurled themselves into the alley's mouth, the two Venusians died instantly as rays from two zam-guns fried various parts of their anatomies into fragments of hard black crust.

As the men fell, Tanton stepped forward and sprayed the bodies with the zam-gun until there was nothing left of either one except a few frag-

ments of crust.

Watching this brutal annihilation, the Earth-girl sobbed and swayed against the wall, close to the end of her strength.

"I'm not doing this because I enjoy it," Tanton growled, "but we can't leave any remains to be discovered later. This is too close to an Undercity entrance. By the way," he said to Ron, as his zam-gun crackled out the consuming heat ray, "since when has Intelligence been hiring fools like you?"

Ron Kratnick flushed in the semi-darkness of the alley. But he hurled back no defense at the insult because he had no defense. He'd acted the fool all right—the callow school boy—and the incident could easily end his career as an agent. "I—I don't know why I did it!" he said. "I knew those spotters were on me and I decided things were hopeless with all the other agents dead. I had to make one gesture of defiance before they killed me. This is my first assignment away from Earth and—"

"—and if you keep on the way you're going, it will be your last," Tanton cut in. "What's your name?"

"Ronald Kratnick. S-rating. Nine successful assignments."

"You must have been a devil for luck," Tanton observed sourly as he cleaned up the last of the unseared flesh on the ground. "And thank heaven I rate you so I won't have to beat a cocky young superior down to his natural size."

Ron felt heat rising within him at the Mercurian's tone and words. But he dampened it swiftly with the knowledge that he deserved censure. And too, this was the great Tanton. One took criticism from Earth's top agent and didn't resent it—at least not outwardly.

"I'll take your orders of course," Ron said, stiffly.

His work completed, Tanton turned and pointed to the girl. "You'd better carry her," he said. "She's about finished. You've got to get down into the Undercity before she can stop and rest. Better cut that rope off her."

"The Undercity?" Ron asked in surprise. He'd heard of rumors of that horrible place—tales of its cruelties and obscenities, but he'd never been really sure it existed in fact. He took a knife from his supply packet and sliced the rope off the girl's body. As he did so, Tanton spoke to her;

"I'm sorry to have treated you so roughly," he said, "but the act had to be convincing—for your sake as well as mine. What's your name, girl, and where are you from?"

For a moment she did not answer, her expression indicating extreme confusion. Then she whispered, "Glory Evans. I was captured in a raid on Smithton, Tennessee."

"Speak up, girl," Tanton said in a not unkindly voice. "You're among friends now. You'll find clothing and safety down below."

Glory Evans did not react with any degree of gratitude. Instead, her fear deepened. Even on Earth she'd heard the horrors of the Undercity. To her, it seemed little different from the fate from which she'd been rescued.

"Things will be better now," Tanton assured her, "but we must keep moving. I'll lead the way. You, girl, walk behind me, and Nine Successful Assignments here, will cover the rear."

RON TOOK the sarcasm in silence and the three of them moved through the alley to stop at what appeared to be an abandoned plastic shack. Tanton tapped a code on the door panel.

While they waited, Ron wondered how the door, which opened outward, could be used before they moved the huge pile of refuse in front of it. He was soon to learn.

After a few minutes, during which time they had evidently been closely inspected from some hidden vantage point, the door opened. But it moved inward, frame and all, on hinges cleverly covered by strips of plastic. Tanton motioned and they climbed over the heap of debris into the small room beyond.

A wizened little Earthman was the keeper of this Undercity entrance. His mouth opened, revealing a toothless jaw, and he said, "You can go on down—on Margot's order, but I have no escort for you."

Tanton was relieved to hear the words as he feared the order allowing his entrance in to the Undercity accompanied by other persons had been cancelled. He'd told Margot he'd be back in three hours. It had been almost four months.

The old Earthman pushed back a panel in what seemed to be solid rock, and Tanton stepped through into a tunnel lit by a pair of dust covered levon tubes. When the girl hesitated, the blue Mercurian grasped her by the arm and pulled her through. His manner was not rough, but was far more firm than gentle. "We've no time to waste on timidity," he snapped.

Once beyond the panel, Tanton turned and, with a gesture, forbade the doorkeeper from closing it. "You'll have to go on alone," he said to Ron. "The two of you. I've got an appointment at the eighteenth hour that I've got to keep. I'll give you a note to Margot and a map showing how to get to her. Don't tell Margot you're an agent. I'll explain things in the note and she'll give you sanctuary."

Tanton wrote swiftly on a pad he took from his supply packet. Then he drew a map on another slip of paper and handed them both to Ron. "Things aren't tough enough, as it is," he growled. "I've got to be saddled with a couple of babes in the wood on top of everything else."

Ron flushed. "See here—" he began.

"Obey orders," Tanton snapped. "Follow this map and you'll be all right." He went out through the panel as he'd come—then turned back. "And keep your zam-gun handy. You'll bump into some unsavory characters down there. A zam-gun speaks the only language they understand."

With that he was gone. The panel slammed to, leaving Ron Kratnick and Glory Evans alone under a levon tube at the head of a long flight of stairs. Ron's resentment at Tanton's attitude was still in his voice as he said, "Well, we might as well get going." He resented being humiliated in front of this lovely girl, and, unconsciously, he took it out on her. "Give me your hand," he said. "I'll lead the way." Glory made no answer as—her hand tight in his—she followed Ron down the long flight of stairs.

At the foot of the stairs, they found a tunnel, lit at irregular intervals by levon tubes, stretching off into seeming infinity. The silence around them was like a live, sinister thing, waiting to pounce at the first opportunity. After traveling a hundred yards, Ron stopped and consulted Tanton's map. "It shouldn't be hard to find, but we've got to keep our eyes open. No telling what manner of creatures live in this cesspool."

AS THEY moved forward, the silence was broken, not by any abrupt sound, but slowly, impercep-

tibly, like leaves stirred by a breeze in a forest. Then, gradually they could detect a new note which arose into a babble of sheer gibberish—the language and dialects of the Universe chuckling and babbling in the darkness.

The girl cringed against Ron. "I can feel them," she whispered in terror. "Eyes in the darkness, boring into me! What—what have we gotten into?"

"We've got to go on," Ron said. "It was Tanton's order. I have to obey."

"Will you make me a promise?" Glory Evans faltered. "Promise to kill me if—if—"

"It's not as bad as that," Ron answered. "These creatures down here know better than to face a zam-gun. They're probably just curious as to who we are."

Ron, entirely inexperienced so far as Venusia was concerned, listened to the gibberings and decided they were motivated by fear. Thus did he completely misinterpret the rising tone.

They were possessed of a diabolical cleverness, these obscene creatures—this legion of the damned lurking in the Undercity of Venusia. Clever to the extent that Ron and Glory were already identified as two inexperienced Earthlings; and also, word was being passed up and down the tunnels that Glory was an Earth girl, fair game for the lusts nurtured in unholy darkness. The word was being passed along, and now the tone of the chatterings was one of exultation.

Ron and Glory walked on, came to an indicated turn on Tanton's map, and moved into a new, broader tunnel.

Now, suddenly, there was complete silence, as though a great hand had been clamped over the myriad mouths in the Undercity.

"See," Ron said. "They've stopped."

"Yes but why—why did they stop?" To the terrified girl it was like a lull before some deadly storm.

"It's all right," Ron said. "Tell me what happened to you. You said you were taken in a raid?"

"Yes," Glory said. She was now walking close to Ron and, through sheer weariness, she no longer attempted to hide her lovely breasts from view. Worn and almost beaten, this futile attempt at modesty must have seemed a small thing to her, beside the horrors she had faced and was facing even now. Ron glanced down and his eyes caught the breathless contour of her young bosom and the smooth lines of her thighs and legs. He jerked his eyes guiltily away as she said, "It happened in the dead of night. We had guards in the town, but no one knew where the Venusians would strike next and it was impossible to cover every city and village. The space ship flashed down and those fiends were screaming in the streets and dragging people out of their homes before we knew what was happening. I was pulled from bed by a Martian raider and dragged from the house. On the porch I saw my mother lying dead—"

"Don't talk about it," Ron said quickly. "I'm sorry I brought it up." Then a trifle bitterly, "I seem to do the wrong thing and say the wrong thing with amazing regularity."

Glory Evans reached up impulsively and laid her hand on his chest. "Don't condemn yourself," she said. "It's all right. You've been good to me. I—I—you don't know what that means after what I've faced."

"I'll see that no one ever hurts you again," Ron said, warmly. "I'm going to—"

AT THAT exact moment, they were plunged into the middle of hell incarnate. From the balconies above, giving onto the tunnel—from out of dark crypts and passages—there poured a smothering army of pure horror.

In the light of the levon tubes Ron and Glory could see them; drooling, slithering, galloping, jumping from above—they came in such numbers as to make Ron's zam-gun useless.

Creatures from the Planetoids—some of which could have been classed as human and others undoubtedly lower animals—the products of places where evolution had run riot—had produced savagely and without regard to any known law.

Ron brought his zam-gun up and burned away three legs of a six-legged creature which had advanced upon him with a single great arm outstretched. A bat-like entity with the face of an Earthman and wings, spawned on some Planetoid, came hissing down from above. Ron cut it in two. It fell with a screech of agony and then Ron's gun was knocked from his hand. He saw a giant Plutonian reached out and pull Glory from a pile of furry, gibbering man-apes. But he could do nothing for her. He was held helpless in the iron grip of a shell-covered creature he couldn't classify.

He heard Glory scream once in terror. Then he went down into feathery darkness, spinning—spinning—spinning, as a great weight crashed against his skull.

CHAPTER V

AFTER ridding himself of Ron and Glory, Tanton went cautiously back into the first tier of Venusia. The going was easier now because night had fallen and he had the advantageous cover of darkness.

He left the alley at its far end and found himself in a deserted street some two miles from the intersection of Darrien Promenade and Antor Street. It was well into the sixteenth hour and Tanton covered the two miles by the process of flitting from one shadow to another, avoiding the main thoroughfares with their bright levin tubes for the dim residential ways.

Upon arriving in the vicinity of the Promenade and Antor, Tanton veered to the left and found an alley leading him along one side of a giant warehouse. It was not by chance that he'd selected the particular intersection for his meeting with Valcan. He knew this neighborhood well, as was proven by the manner in which he found the small, ground-level window into the warehouse.

Once inside, he lay hidden in a fuel bin until the watchman plodded past on his hourly rounds. Then Tanton commandeered an empty lift and rode to the forty-second floor. Quitting the lift, he let himself out on the roof and walked half a mile through a maze of ventilators until he came to the far side of the building. Time had moved halfway through the seventeenth hour.

Now, from his vantage point at the roof edge, he could look straight down upon the intersection at which he was to meet Valcan.

A scene of great activity was laid out below him. The section had been roped off and, under strong lights, a great many men were working feverishly. They were operating in crews, digging into every nook, every suspicious corner which might house a hidden door into the Undercity. Brit-guns had been brought into play in order to cut passages through rock. Every door in the vicinity had been broken open and even sections of the pavement had been eaten away by the

Brit-rays.

Tanton did not even bother to congratulate himself upon finding he had forecasted Valcan's move successfully. There had been no doubt whatever in his mind as to how the Secret Service Chief would proceed.

The man wanted, above all, a safe entrance into the Undercity. The cunning with which these entrances were hidden, had been the main thorn in Darrien's side. False entrances had been found from time to time, but they had invariably turned out to be death traps for Darrien's men. And upon the two occasions when true entrances had been found, it was almost as though Tza-Necros had given out the information himself, because the Undercity King's men were waiting for the onslaught of Darrien's warriors. And, in each case after the slaughter, the entrance and dozens of the tunnels lying beneath, were sealed solid with ray-contaminated rock which made sure death the price of further tampering.

Tanton chuckled to himself at the sight of Valcan himself pacing restlessly about down below, receiving negative reports from his squads and venting his rage by smashing one lieutenant to the ground with a single blow of his fist.

TANTON waited patiently and, as the eighteenth hour approached, he saw Valcan call his men in and send them away, a group at a time until the area was practically deserted. The portable lights were extinguished and dragged away and finally, only Valcan himself remained, almost invisible now, in the deep shadow of a doorway.

Apparently satisfied, Tanton left the building by the same route he'd entered it. He emerged from the alleyway and leaned casually against a wall on Antor Street, scanning the

passers-by. There weren't many. After a few minutes, Tanton selected a child of not more than ten years, collared him and pulled him close to the wall. He pointed down the street toward the doorway in which Valcan lurked.

"You see that entrance?" he said to the startled child. "You'll find a man standing there." Tanton thrust a folded piece of paper into the child's hand together with a ten-creda piece. "Carry this note to him and then be on your way. He won't hurt you. Just hand him the note and then go and spend these credas."

Released, the child was off at a dead run. Tanton watched as Valcan's arm came out of the shadows to take the proffered note. He imagined the reaction in Valcan's not-too-clever mind as he read:

Now that you've enjoyed yourself, let's go on with our business. Walk seven sectors down Antor street. If you have men following you I'll know it. If you try any tricks I'll probably have a chance to kill you.

Tanton

The blue Mercurian watched as Valcan wadded up the note and threw it angrily to the pavement, then looked searchingly up and down the street. Tanton could see the indecision working in Valcan's mind and was somewhat relieved when the latter finally quitted the doorway and strode down Antor Street with all the mannerisms of a sulky child.

Tanton did not follow Valcan. Instead he traveled swiftly up into the second tier of the thoroughfare and moved with long strides toward the rendezvous. His pace was such that, when Valcan had finished counting off seven sectors, Tanton's voice greeted him from a dark areaway:

"I'm glad to see you've come to

your senses. Here—let me put this blindfold on you."

Valcan scowled and raised his hands in objection, whereupon Tanton said, "Don't be a fool. This alone should convince you I'm sincere. If you were allowed to find an entrance into the Undercity, you know very well Tza-Necros would never let you return alive."

The Secret Service chief made no further objection, allowing himself to be blindfolded and led back through the areaway by the crafty Tanton.

There followed now a period of what seemed aimless wandering. In truth it was just that, and eventually, Tanton brought Valcan back to the exact spot from which they'd departed. It was the place of his first entrance into the Undercity four months previous.

There was the red, peering eye and, once inside, the plea: "A creda for food, my master. This miserable one starves while serving the great Tza-Necros."

Tanton knew the wretch was well fed and that the money would go for a brief hour of drug-induced ecstasy. He parted with a silver creda and led Valcan through the inner door and down into the first tunnel.

THERE he removed the blindfold.

Valcan rubbed his eyes and scowled down the long passageway. "If I could bring Darrien information about this place—information with which to destroy it—I would soon sit far higher in his counsels," Valcan said.

And in Tanton's mind was a brusque, unuttered question: Doesn't this fool know he's going to die? How can a man allow lust of a woman and greed for prestige blind him to stark fact? How can men be so gullible?

"The vilest rats are the hardest to kill," Tanton said, easily. "But now

we must hurry. And keep your gun handy. We may encounter resistance."

But there was no resistance—only eyes gleaming in dark places and the foul gibberings of creatures who had not seen sunlight for countless years.

Tanton left the Secret Service chief in the small anteroom to Margot's garden—left him under the watchful eye of the hostile young Plutonian—and hurried on to find Margot.

She was resting on a fur-covered lounge in her apartments. As Tanton entered, she arose and drew a robe around her golden body. "I thought you'd been killed," she said, and Tanton was elated to detect genuine concern in her eyes.

"It took longer than I thought," Tanton replied. "But nothing has changed. Aside from the time I spent in jail, the thing has gone off without a hitch." He hesitated for a moment. "You haven't changed your mind have you?"

She came toward him, a tired smile on her face. "If you had returned in three hours you'd have found me in a different mind. But for three months I've dreamed of freedom—of the good green Earth—and now—well, I'll do anything—anything to get away from this place."

"Excellent. Let me brief you on what is to be done." Seated beside Margot on the luxurious couch, Tanton explained very carefully what her role was to be. "And now I'll bring the fool in," he said. "Then I must seek an audience with Tza-Necros."

At the door, he turned back. "By the way, what have you done with my two babes-in-the-woods? You've put them out of harm's way I hope?"

Margot questioned with her eyes. "Your babes-in-the-woods? What are you talking about?"

"An Earthman and a girl I took

with me when I broke out of jail. I sent them to you with a note? You mean they didn't get here?"

"Of course not. I would have been told immediately."

The news saddened Tanton somewhat, but not too much. Obviously the two had been trapped—set upon out in the tunnels. By all odds they were dead now. Too bad. The girl was a raving beauty and the young agent was probably not beyond hope. He'd have probably been a good spy with a little guidance.

But, so long as neither of the two had been included in Tanton's original orders, he felt no responsibility for them. There were far larger things at stake than those two. With no further thought on the matter, he hurried across the garden to where Valcan was impatiently waiting.

"She is awaiting you," Tanton said. "And I must say, you are indeed a fortunate man. I regret that my own luck never exerts itself to such an extent in my behalf."

Valcan wore his perpetual frown. "Let's get ahead with it. This place makes me nervous. I wish now I'd signed that execution order."

"You'll change your mind when you see her," Tanton replied cheerfully.

He pushed Valcan through the inner door and closed it behind them. "This way," he said, and led Valcan down the yellow brick path.

"I can't believe it!" Valcan exclaimed. "I don't understand how such a place could have been built. It's beyond conception!"

"Slave labor," Tanton said, as if that explained the whole thing. "Margot is waiting over there. Come."

HE PUSHED Valcan into Margot's chamber, and when the latter saw Margot, reclining on the lounge, he stopped with a quick

breath standing before her.

"Here is your new master, my dear," Tanton said.

Margot arose from the couch. "My lord," she murmured, and came forward, sensuous, languorous, her arms reaching.

Valcan took a step forward, but was brought to a halt by Tanton's sharp words. "Just a minute. There is a small formality before I can leave you to your own devices."

"I don't understand," Valcan said.

"I can understand why it slipped your mind—the matter of the projector's location. I have demonstrated my good faith and that of Tza-Necros by bringing you here. The time has come for you to deliver. Where is the projector located?"

Valcan's bedazzled mind was upon other things. Without taking his eyes from Margot's lush body, he said, "It is in a gray stone building on Neptune Way near the intersection of South Plaza. The building is marked as a food processing plant—"

Valcan brought himself up sharply upon the sudden realization of what he'd done. He'd told the truth! This crafty Mercurian had manipulated him into a trap. With devilish cunning, he'd asked his question at exactly the right moment—when Valcan's guard was down.

Valcan had told the truth and he was certain that Tanton knew it.

In so doing, Valcan realized he'd divested himself of his one weapon—his sole means of defense—now that he had walked blindly into what could be a trap.

Swiftly his suspicions returned to be resolved into dreadful certainties. The blue Mercurian was no emissary of Tza-Necros! He was an agent of Earth Intelligence, sent to locate and destroy the ray projector. And—in league with this golden creature of the Undercity, he'd drawn information

from Valcan which no method of torture, however fiendish, would have produced.

How could I have been such a fool? Valcan asked himself. His eyes darted, in desperation, toward the harness which lay on the floor near Margot's couch.

But he was never to get his hands on the zam-gun holstered in the harness. Margot, schooled by Tanton for just such a possibility as this, moved with swift grace to stoop and snatch the gun from its clip. She stepped backward, the gun ready for use, but her face showed both indecision and anger.

The latter was directed at Tanton, not Valcan, and her red lips framed an accusation. "You used me!" She said. "This talk about a ray projector. I don't understand it, but I know there is something wrong. What sort of an intrigue is this, Tanton?"

Her sudden perception threw the blue Mercurian slightly off balance. He hadn't expected it at this point.

A MOMENT later he was fighting for his life as Valcan hurled himself across the intervening space and smashed the agent to the floor.

"You'll never use that information!" Valcan yelled. He locked Tanton's arms to his side, thus preventing him from drawing his gun, and then wrapped his free arm around Tanton's head seeking to twist it from the agent's body.

Tanton managed to free his left arm as pain shot down his spine. He locked his hard, shell-covered hand around Valcan's throat and heaved upward with his knees. Valcan flew through space, but unfortunately for Tanton, his own zam-gun, knocked from its clip on his harness, bounced away also and skidded well beyond reach.

Both antagonists dived for the

weapon. Both laid a hand on it at once. Then Margot's voice, so filled with fright and anguish as to freeze them both, cried out;

"Stop it! For God's sake, stop it!"

They, too, had heard the heavy footsteps coming in from the garden through the open portal. As one man, they turned and stared at what approached.

A great hairy monstrosity with the body of a giant ape, yet more erect and with a certain dignity in its movement. Two pairs of long arms extended from the thick torso upon which sat the ugly head of a Planetoid misfit. Only the eyes of the creature commanded respect. They were large, liquid, beautiful, perpetually brilliant. And without doubt they mirrored the able brain within the skull of Tza-Necros.

He was accompanied by a guard of four Plutonians, each armed with two zam-guns and a Brit projector.

Both Tanton and Valcan got slowly to their feet, their personal differences forgotten at the approach of this greater peril.

"He'll kill us all," Margot whispered in terror. "He'll kill us all."

Tanton looked desperately around for a means of exit. There was none. He lashed at his brain, demanding a plan of escape. But even Tanton's agile mind could not work miracles. It seemed his clever intrigue was to go for naught.

There's always some little angle you can't figure, he told himself sourly as Tza-Necros' gross body appeared in the doorway

CHAPTER VI

WHEN RON KRATNICK opened his eyes he was still not sure of having returned to consciousness. Truly the scene around him could as easily have been something in a

nightmare. It was unbelievable.

He lay in what appeared to be a vast cavern. An open fire in its center threw weird dancing shadows on the far-away ceiling and walls. The fire also revealed a circle of bodies and faces. Hideous bodies and faces which could have well been done by a painter gone mad. Crouching, lascivious, bloodlusting entities formed a circle, well back from the fire, and there was continuous, terrifying sound as they jabbered, cackled and snarled in a hundred languages and dialects.

Close beside Ron lay the still body of Glory Evans. Her lovely back was curved as—with her knees drawn up—she buried her face in her arms. Ron slid a hand to her shoulder. She quivered from head to foot and Ron felt a sob run through her body.

Immediately the jabbering heightened as a thousand eyes saw that movement, and a giant voice roared out: "Be still, all of you! Stop this babbling or I'll lash the hides off you!"

Ron turned his head to behold an Earthman standing close to the fire. He was a giant in stature, close to seven feet in height. He wore a pair of tattered pants, sawed off just above the knees. His feet were naked and his great chest was covered with thick curly hair.

But it was the man's face that held Ron. A face mirroring a thousand years of evil. It had been slashed and scarred in a hundred brawls but—oddly—the monster's teeth were all in place—large, even, and white as Earth-snow.

The man held a zam-gun in one hand and a long black whip in the other, and his manner left little doubt that he was commanding the situation. Ron lay motionless as the man's voice boomed out;

"We've had a piece of luck thrown

our way and you fools are too stupid to realize it. I don't know if this man is worth anything, but the girl is a prize indeed."

And a chorus went up from the shadows to show that all the fiends agreed. "Graaaaa — yaaaaa — ffffft-taaaa!" and a sound like sharp teeth cracking bones.

The giant cracked his whip. "Silence! Listen to me! Listen to Caliban who can tear you apart a dozen at a time. Does anyone doubt that?"

The clamor subsided into a surly backwash and the one who called himself Caliban went on. "The trouble here is that none of you are equipped to think. The girl is a prize, yes, but what good is one girl when there are hundreds of us. We could only fight over her and many would be killed and the girl torn to pieces in the bargain."

Somewhere back in the shadows was an articulate voice; "Then let's start tearing. I'll take an arm to put around my neck when I go to sleep."

Another voice: "I'll take—"

But coarse laughter drowned out the rest and Caliban was shouting again. "We know that Tza-Necros has an eye for beauty. We know that had he seen this girl first, she'd never have come our way."

A shout of agreement.

"Then by all that's holy—let's sell her to him. If I'm any judge, Tza-Necros will pay us enough so that each man in the Undercity gets ten credas. Isn't that better than maybe a shred of flesh and probably nothing at all?"

THERE WAS a change in the gibbering and cackling. The air was filled with whisperings now and many little conferences went on out in the darkness.

"If you agree," Caliban shouted, "I'll arrange a meeting with Tza-

Necros and I promise you I won't come back empty handed."

A shout of approval went up. Immediately Caliban turned and prodded Ron with his foot. Ron came to a sitting position and Caliban bent down to sweep Glory Evans up into his arms.

"I'll put them in the prison," Caliban said, "and then negotiate with the Overlord."

Two willing lieutenants seized Ron by either arm and dragged him along in the wake of the striding Caliban. The circle broke at one side of the cavern and the place was quitted for a low-ceilinged tunnel leading off at a slightly rising angle. Some few hundred yards of this and another cavern was achieved; a smaller one but still large enough to house a small stone building with room to spare.

Two guardsmen stood in front of the door but their attitude, far from hostile, was almost ingratiating as Caliban said, "We have two tenants for you. We want to leave them here while I seek an audience with the Overlord."

The eyes of both guardsmen were on the body of Glory as Caliban cradled her in his arms like a child.

"You're going to sell her?" one of the guards asked.

"If Tza-Necros will buy."

"I'll buy," said the other. "I'll give you a hundred credas—platinum."

A roar of laughter went up from the citizens of the Undercity who were now pouring into the cavern. "Come back when you have a hundred thousand credas to spend," Caliban said. "Open the door."

The guard did as he was bidden and Caliban strode into the building and laid Glory on the floor. The jail was apparently a one-room affair occupying the entire building. It was very dark inside, the only illumination coming from the levon tubes

outside the small windows.

Ron was shoved inside with such force that he went to his knees. He heard the door slam and the key turn in the lock. Then Caliban's booming voice directed, evidently, at the guards:

"You're going to be watched pretty closely while I'm gone, so I'd advise you to keep the door locked and stay outside."

A roar of understanding went up from the crowd. Quite obviously, the guards would not be left to themselves. Then Caliban's heavy footsteps faded away.

Ron got painfully to his feet and went to Glory Evans, who lay motionless on the floor. He knelt beside her and turned her so he could look down into her face. By the light of the levon tube rays filtering in, he could see the thick-lashed eyes open. His hand, having dropped unconsciously to her breast felt the rise and fall of her breathing. He snatched it away instantly. Somehow it seemed like taking advantage of helplessness.

Glory did not draw back from Ron's touch. In fact she did not seem conscious of it so much as the compassion in his attitude.

With sudden abandon and with a flood of tears, she threw herself into his arms and her manner was that of a child; a child searching for pity, tenderness, for something to keep from cracking up completely.

RON HELD her close in his arms as the explosion of tears and grief wracked her body. He said nothing, allowing her to cry herself out. And he was mute for another reason: he could think of nothing to say—no words of comfort for this harrassed and tortured girl. There was only hopelessness, evil, and viciousness to be anticipated. Better that he remain silent.

He became conscious, now for the first time, of what Glory Evans really was. With her beauty held close in his arms, the perfume of her in his nostrils, he realized it had been more than a breaking point that had made him leap to her aid there by the cafe. He'd heard, vaguely, that sometimes love is like that; it can come suddenly, without apparent reason, and not even be recognized for what it is.

She was quiet now. She raised her face to his and he could see her smile in the dimness. "I'm sorry," she said. "Sorry for being such a problem to you. You've trouble enough without a weeping female on your hands."

Without thought, as naturally as taking a breath, Ron pulled her close and kissed her. An odd, tingling shock went through him at contact with her lips. She did not draw away. For a long moment she lay motionless, neither giving nor taking. Then she came alive with a suddenness that thrilled Ron and she accepted his kiss avidly, hungrily.

After an eternity, she drew away and nestled down into his arms. For a long time nothing was said. Then Ron's bitterness of spirit returned.

"I've failed you," he said miserably.

"Failed me? Don't say that, darling. You've done your best. It will be easier—whatever comes will be easier—knowing this—having felt your arms around me—your kiss."

"I'm no good. Sure—I'm rated as a successful agent on Earth—nine assignments, but what were they? Local disturbances—things petty and unimportant beside an interplanetary project like this."

"You're wrong," she said, fiercely. "They wouldn't have sent you if they hadn't—"

"They sent me because they had no one else! It was a move of des-

peration. Why, I'm not in the same league with men like Tanton. It's like comparing an advanced scientist and a—a school boy!"

She put her fingers over his lips. "I won't let you say such things!"

But he drew her hand away and there was sudden hope in his face. "Tanton. I'd forgotten. Why, we aren't lost! Far from it. With Tanton calling the turns, it's just a matter of time. He'll get us out. Good old Tanton. He'll see that I get a chance to at least use my muscles even if I don't know how to use my head."

There had been faint sounds as of movement somewhere in the cell, but so intent had they been upon themselves, they hadn't noticed them. Now the sounds came louder, hoarse breathing and the shifting of a body.

Ron tensed as he searched the shadows about him. "Did you hear that?"

Glory raised fearful eyes. "Yes. There's someone else in this cell."

"A rodent of some sort maybe. I'll look around." He got slowly to his feet and sought to disengage himself from Glory, but she clung to him desperately.

"Don't leave me," she said. "I'll go with you. Let me hold your hand."

Together they moved softly in the direction from which the sounds came. The cell was a large one, running at least a hundred feet from wall to wall. It seemed miles until they finally caught sight of the figure lying prone in one corner.

"It's—it's a man," Glory whispered. "Another prisoner. It's—a blue Mercurian!"

Ron bent swiftly down over the figure. His hands explored. Then he braced himself and pulled the inert body forward into the dim light sifting through the window.

"It's *Tanton!*" he exclaimed in sheer unbelief.

CHAPTER VII

AFTER leaving the jail cavern, Caliban threaded his way unerringly through the tunnels until he came to a great bronze door over which glowed several oversized levon tubes. He lifted in both hands the great iron knocker and allowed it to drop three times against the door. Three claps of thunder boomed through the tunnels. A full five minutes passed, after which a small door cut in the great bronze barrier opened to reveal two repulsive creatures of the Planetoids standing alert with drawn guns.

The giant eyed them with a certain contempt as he folded his great arms and said, "I am Caliban. The Overlord knows me well from keeping the rats in check down here. Tell him Caliban brings good news and would have an audience."

One of the guards stepped through the doorway to make sure Caliban was alone. Then he motioned the man inside and closed the door which Tza-Necros kept between himself and the scum roaming the tunnels of the Undercity.

One of the guards remained at his post while the other led Caliban through a maze of marble corridors to another closed door. Bidding Caliban wait, the guard opened the door and stepped through, closing it after him.

But during that brief moment, Caliban's ears were struck by the surge of sound—the withering blasphemies roared out in a voice which would have put a bull to shame; the curses and oaths of ten planets spewing forth from the foul throat of a man beside himself with rage.

Caliban frowned. He knew that voice well. Tza-Necros was in a vile humor, to say the least. Caliban's annoyance at this turn of events was

plain to see. He cared not a whit as to the luckless victim of Tza-Necros wrath. The thought in his mind was that the Overlord would be in no mood to do business.

When contented in mind, Tza-Necros would not hesitate to pay a hundred thousand credas for so lush an object of his lust as the fair-skinned Earth-girl. This Caliban knew. But, in his present mood, Tza-Necros was unpredictable. He might even go so far as to have Caliban slaughtered in his tracks for no reason at all.

Frowning, the giant Undercity leader turned away from the door and began retracing his steps. He would return to the tunnels and wait for the storm to blow over.

But he had gone scarcely ten steps when the door opened and the guard called out. "Wait there! Where are you going? Tza-Necros commands your presence in the throne room."

Reluctantly Caliban turned back, cursing himself for a laggard and consigning his soul to the devils of Neptune. He marched into the throne room with his head held high, expecting the worst.

As the door closed upon him he stood transfixed at the sight he beheld. Tza-Necros his four fists doubled, his arms held in rage above his ugly head, was standing on the dais in the center of the great room. On either side of him, a line of frozen-faced guards were at motionless attention, their eyes staring straight ahead.

On the floor before the dais, lay a naked, golden girl of breathless beauty; a beauty which could be seen even through the blood she had shed and the torturous lashings to which she had been subjected.

tian hillman, had stepped back and was running the whip through his closed hand to cleanse it of blood.

And Caliban could see the blood had not all been that of the girl. Nearby lay the still body of an Earthman, and Caliban was startled to note that the official harness of Darrien's Secret Service on the back of the prone figure. A quick glance told Caliban the man had been beaten to death. The girl, however, was alive.

As Caliban entered the room, Tza-Necros beckoned with two arms and shouted. "Come forward, Caliban! You arrive at an opportune time. I have a present for you and your underground scum!"

"A present, my lord?"

"A rare one. This unfaithful witch is gall to my eyes. Entertaining lovers under my very nose. Betraying me after I've laid the treasure of the Universe at her feet. At first I thought it would sooth me to see the vile little bitch flogged to death, but that is not enough and your coming has given me a happy thought."

"I am yours to command, my lord."

"Then take her down into the tunnels with you and sate yourself as only a bucko like you would know how to do."

"I can only consider myself fortunate."

Tza-Necros raised a hand. "That is not all. A stipulation, my faithful rogue. When you are through with her, I command you to seek out the most loathsome of your creatures and devise added tortures. And let the vengeance of Tza-Necros be seen by all. Take her."

Caliban stepped forward and lifted the unconscious Margot to his shoulder. "Thank you, my lord," he said, and turned to leave the throne room.

But he was brought to a halt by

AS CALIBAN entered the room, the whipmaster, a brawny Mar-

Tza-Necros' voice. The Overlord, now somewhat exhausted by his rage, was passing a hand across his forehead. "Hold until I release you," he said. Then in a milder, but petulant voice. "There was something. All devils! but with all this chatter about rays to clean out the Undercity and rays to hold off the Earthlings and Margot consorting with two lovers at once—I can't get my thoughts straight. But there was something."

There was a moment of dead silence after which Tza-Necros said, "Oh yes of course—your business. You did not wander in here by chance. What brings you up from the lower tunnels? Is there trouble—unrest?"

"No, my lord. I had business but it is of a trivial nature. I wouldn't think of bothering you with it at a time like this when you are wrought up by ingratitude. It can wait."

"Good man, my Caliban. Come tomorrow and I'll have a flacon of wine for you."

Caliban went out as he had come and he was greeted in open-mouthed wonder by the guards. Old in experience, this was the first time they'd seen a man make his exit carrying a beautiful blood-soaked girl over his shoulder. They closed the door on Caliban and stood babbling between themselves.

Caliban was not happy. Far from satisfied with events, he went slowly down the tunnel, scarcely conscious of the girl he carried. What, he wondered, was all this talk about a ray to depopulate the Undercity. As to the troubles between Earth and Venus, Caliban cared nothing. He was content in the Undercity and that was where his loyalty and his interests lay.

He mulled over the snatches of information Tza-Necros had given out in his tirade and found them to be no

information at all. Obviously the girl on Caliban's shoulder had been untrue to Tza-Necros, and for that Caliban hardly blamed her. But had a portion of Tza-Necros' wrath been generated by treachery of another nature? Who had that Earthman been—the one dead on the floor of the throne room? Obviously an official in the Secret Service.

Caliban shook his head in perplexity and went on his way.

CHAPTER VIII

TANTON was in deplorable shape. Obviously, he'd borne the brunt of a vicious attack during which weapons far more destructive than whips had been used. The hard shell-covering found on all blue Mercurians in lieu of skin had been cracked in three places. The green life-sap which flowed in his veins had run freely from these wounds and from his nose and mouth.

As Ron pulled him into the light, Tanton opened his eyes and sighed deeply. "It was a great show while it lasted," he said in a labored voice. "I did some fast talking, but Tza-Necros went completely bats and refused to believe anything. Valcan was killed and maybe Margot too, for all I know. Mercurians are a lot harder to kill so I'm being saved for the hot hooks and the roasting pits."

He raised a hand to his battered head and then noted the consternation and bewilderment of Ron and Glory.

"You don't have the least idea what I'm talking about, do you? Well—it doesn't make any difference. By the way, what happened to you two?"

In a few words Ron told him, whereupon Tanton sighed again. "Couldn't even walk down a tunnel without getting into trouble, eh? Well, it doesn't matter. We'll all be butted in twenty-four hours. It

looks as though this one certainly backfired on me." He came to a sitting position. "Ouch! One of those guards used an iron club."

"You—you mean there's no hope?" Glory faltered.

"We're both sitting in the same spot," Tanton answered tartly. "Can you see any?"

His sharp mood was generated, not by fear of what seemed the inevitable, but by the knowledge that he was being shown up as a failure before these two. "Help me to my feet, will you? I want to see how bad a shape I'm in."

As Tanton creaked and twisted erect, the sounds outside the prison deepened into a roar. "Something's going on," Ron said. "Maybe they're coming for us." He turned to face the door, his arm around Glory's slim shoulder.

The door opened after some minutes of heated controversy outside, and Caliban strode in with Margot over his shoulder. Tanton's eyes widened. Without preliminaries, he asked, "Where did you get her?"

"A gift to the citizens of the Undercity by Tza-Necros," Caliban said. He was frowning and seemed bemused—far away—as though deep in thought. "I'm going to put her away until I can figure this thing out. There's more here than meets the eye. Tza-Necros says she wasn't faithful to him, but there's more—a lot more—and I don't like it."

No one saw Tanton's eyes brighten as he watched Caliban place Margot on the hard floor. And it was of course impossible for the rest of them to know what was going on in his rapier sharp mind—that he was even now formulating plans to turn defeat into victory.

GLORY, WITH a cry of pity, dropped to her knees beside the

still Margot and cradled the golden beauty's head in her lap.

Tanton ignored both of them, his eyes on Caliban. "I don't think I've had the pleasure," he said.

The other scowled at him. "My name is Caliban. I've lived in the Undercity for twenty years. Who are you and where do you come from?"

Ron opened his mouth to fill in with an introduction of his superior, but a quick motion of Tanton's hand blocked off the young agent's words.

"I am a gentleman of fortune," Tanton replied and there was a distinct note of sadness in his voice. "I garner information and go about selling it, making a creda wherever possible. But now I've come to the end of my string."

There was contempt in Caliban's voice. "Oh—an informer. And Tza-Necros has condemned you to death?"

Tanton sighed as if in resignation. "True, but I will not suffer in the roasting pit. I'll die here in this hole along with the rest of the Undercity's people. In twenty-four hours there won't be a single living thing below ground in Venusia."

Caliban snatched the bait and bolted it down—swallowed it whole. He advanced menacingly upon Tanton. "What are you talking about, Blue man. Is it something about a ray that will destroy all life in the Undercity?"

Tanton was taken aback—at least his wide eyes so indicated. "You seem to know a great deal, Caliban. May I ask—?"

The huge Earthman frowned importantly. "I have my sources of information. I have ears and eyes."

Tanton made as if to turn away. "Then there is nothing I can tell you, except that I think we should both do the merciful thing."

"What do you mean?"

"Keep our knowledge to ourselves."

It will do no good to panic the Undercity by telling the people the truth. So long as they must die, let them die quietly without knowing what hit them."

Caliban strode forward and seized Tanton roughly by the shoulder. "You mean we should lie here like rats in a trap waiting for death?"

"What else is there to do?"

Caliban brushed aside all pretense. "You know far more than I—tell me."

Tanton nursed his cracked shoulder-shell. "There isn't a great deal to it. You know, of course, that Darrien swore long ago to clean out the Undercity. But it was only recently that he found a means of doing so—a poison ray which will be turned into an entrance to the Undercity—an entrance which his men have found—a ray which will travel into every nook and cranny of this place and not even the smallest microbe will be left alive. I tell you when Darrien gets through, the Undercity will be the most sterile place in the Universe."

"How do you know all this?"

"Getting such information is my business. In this case I corrupted a high official of Darrien's Secret Police—promised him great wealth when Tza-Necros heard his story. The man I brought into the Undercity was the Secret Service chief himself—Valcan."

Caliban clenched his great fist. Of course! The Earthman he'd seen lying dead at Tza-Necros' feet. The face had seemed familiar. Now he knew! The man had been Valcan. "What happened?" Caliban demanded.

TANTON shrugged. "I made a mistake. I did not have direct access to Tza-Necros. I could reach his ear only through Margot, for whom I once did a service." Tanton stopped and shook his head sadly. "But such an approach was a fatal mistake, because Tza-Necros found us in Margot's

apartment and accused us of being her lovers. We were dragged into the throne room and beaten. Valcan died under the lash and I'm to be roasted on hot hooks. But, as I say, that will never happen, because—"

Caliban waved an impatient hand. "Stop babbling," he shouted. "You said the ray will be used within twenty-four hours? Do you know the location of the projector?"

"Yes, but Tza-Necros would not listen—"

"The fool!" Caliban thundered. "The thick-headed fool! Sacrificing the lives of all of us because of his stupidity."

"I'd hesitate to put it so bluntly, but that's about it. Well—no matter now. The game has been played and lost."

Caliban towered over the blue man and raised his fists. "What are you—a spineless jellyfish? Do you propose to cringe against the wall and wait for death?"

"What else is there to do?"

"Fight, man, fight! There are ten thousand creatures down here—ten thousand fighters who have groveled too long under the heel of Tza-Necros. With their lives at stake do you think they'll stand helplessly by?"

It was as if a great plan had suddenly blossomed in Tanton's mind. "Why, of course! Why didn't I think of it?" His eyes lit up with a great hope. "I can see it now. Ten thousand citizens of the Undercity streaming up into Venusia, not only to destroy the ray but to avenge a hundred years of persecution! It's—it's magnificent!"

Caliban strode to the door and threw it open. His great voice boomed out, echoing and reechoing through the tunnels: "Citizens of the Undercity. Hear me! Come and gather around if you value your lives! We have been betrayed and left to die! All of you

who would strike a blow for your own existence, come and hear me!"

Inside, Tanton closed the door. Then he crossed to where Margot was regaining consciousness, and knelt beside her. "I'm going to keep my word," he said. "In a matter of hours you'll be on your way back to Earth. Things didn't go exactly as I'd planned, but—"

He stopped speaking as Glory, who was still cradling Margot gave a low cry of wonder and horror. Ron also came close and knelt down. He raised his eyes to Tanton with a look of utter consternation, then lowered them again to where Margot was changing—magically—before their eyes. First, small wrinkles had appeared at the corners of her mouth and her eyes. Now the flesh—the glorious golden beauty of her was shrinking visibly—drying up and falling away under skin which was becoming gray and withered.

Margot's mouth—now an ancient and toothless one—opened like the mouth of a gasping fish.

"The hormones," she croaked. "I was supposed to take the hormones—I—"

The aging became swifter now. It was like some mad montage—a young and beautiful girl fading away and a hideous wrinkled crone taking her place.

"The hormones," she gasped. Then the pitiful old mouth opened and hung slack; the gray-coated, sightless eyes became set in a ghastly stare.

SWIFTLY, Tanton reached down and closed the eyes forever. "She was very old, you know," he said quietly. "Well over a hundred years. She was kept young by a secret hormone that Tza-Necros provided. Without it, she was doomed."

"She's—she's *dead!*" Glory

breathed in horror. So swift had been the transition from blooming beauty to dried-up skeleton, that the effect was chilling in its grimness.

Tanton lifted the wisp of a body and moved off into the shadows. "She lead a full life," he said. "A very long life. But I have a feeling she's happier now than she's ever been." He returned, empty-handed, to the wide-eyed Glory. "Maybe someone ought to say a prayer," he muttered, then turned toward the door as the voice of the mob outside rose to a thunder.

The door opened and Caliban rushed in. "We're on the move," he shouted. "If you know where the ray is located, you'd better lead the way."

But Tanton knew it was more than the nonexistent death ray that motivated this upheaval. His lie had been merely the trigger—the small thing that had touched off the revolt. True motivation lay far deeper. Here was an irresistible surge of outraged humanity—horrible humanity it was true, but humanity nonetheless—moving up in fury to right ancient wrongs.

And it was in Tanton's mind where the first seeds of this violence had been sewn—long ago by the pompous voice of a politician: ("*Let Venus be our penal colony—*"). And there must have been a twinge in the Blue Mercurian's conscience, because he told himself: One must weigh two evils and attack the greater with the smaller. All is greed and hunger among men and their greed and hunger are the only effective weapons to be used against them. To defeat darkness, the tools of darkness must be used.

Then the roar of the mob rose to an even greater volume to bring Tanton back to the business at hand

CHAPTER IX

GLORY HAD been provided with adequate clothing—the harness of a fighter—and she moved—with

Tanton, Ron, and Caliban—at the head of a column that assaulted the bronze door to Tza-Necros' underground palace.

The door was cut to pieces and a wave of misfits of the Universe, swept over all resistance in its onward surge. Guarded by a circle of Undercity warriors, Glory saw Tza-Necros—his inner guard annihilated—battling like ten demons with his back to the wall.

The Undercity fighters lay in stacks around him. His more lethal weapons gone, he slashed a crimson circle with a short-sword clutched in each of his four hands. "Back—back, you foul scum!" he roared. "I am your king! I am your master!" And he proved himself their master right up to the final, bloody moment when a zam-gun ray cut off his arms, one by one and left him a helpless, screaming maniac. The scum of the Universe moved in on him then, to take bloody accounting for the years of pain and exploitation. They gloried in tearing him to pieces, bit by bit—in inflicting savage torture until his last scream became a gurgle as life left his grotesque body. His last words were a bewildered plea: "I'm one of you—one of you—one of you. Have mercy."

Then death.

The mob, aflame from the new freedom and the smell of blood, surged on through the palace, tearing Margot's garden to pieces, brick by brick. Then up into Venusia, along with the hordes of fellow exiles who were streaming out of the Undercity entrances to spread bloody destruction in all directions.

The astonished population of Venusia stared in flat-footed horror at the sudden egress from the depths; many of them stared too long and went down to quick death as the waves of madness released, engulfed and destroyed them. The policing mechanisms of the city went into complete

panic and chaos. The more experienced Secret Service and the City Police were unable to function because of the panicked populace. There was no room for maneuvering—no chance to assemble and deploy, so mad was the scene of carnage and so frenzied the attack.

Tanton, moving at the head of Caliban's column, adroitly held the latter to the main objective—the ray projector. Working through the giant Earthman, he displayed a skill which any great general would have envied. Truly, the man seemed possessed of limitless talents.

Due to his generalship, the column was organized and thrown around the gray building with military precision. The assault on the entrances was launched as one movement. The doors were beaten down and Glory, Ron, and Tanton, were among the first of the invaders to be swept inside.

Glory heard herself, screaming, calling out to be heard over the din of battle. "Caliban! I saw him go down!"

"He was cut in two with a zam-gun," Tanton shouted. "Come—this way! Quick!" He pushed Glory roughly toward a stairway leading off in to upper levels, and motioned Ron to follow. There was deep concern in Tanton's voice because, again it seemed, ill-luck was besetting him.

OUT IN THE streets there had been panic and chaos, but not so in the ray-projector building. Here was the cream of Darrien's vanguards—the picked soldiery of all the Universe—trained and briefed for only one job—the protection of the ray projector at any cost.

Their ranks had been dented by the first wave of crazed Undercity fighters, but they had stiffened and gotten down to their work. Like machines, they poured death into the invaders—like implacable robots, they

reformed their lines and hurled back Caliban's hordes. And in this action, Tanton sensed his own defeat.

He knew full well that the Under-city fighters would be beaten. When Darrien's organized ranks gained their footing they would move like a steam roller over the deceived and misled creatures from underground. Truly—though with much blood and rapine—it would be the end of the Under-city, but Tanton had gambled that during the upheaval, he could accomplish his purpose. Now he seemed doomed to defeat, as the elite guard of the gray building pushed the last of Caliban's sorry army out into the streets and made fast their own defenses.

With the main action going on below, Tanton found no one to bar his way as he led the two Earthlings up the stairs. His hopes bloomed anew at the thought that possibly he could achieve his ends by stealth. The projector would certainly be located high up in the building. Maybe it could still be reached. Possibly even Darrien's elite guard had made the mistake of depending on the first line of defense down below and had given no thought to the danger of infiltration through their ranks.

The infiltration had been accomplished, and as the three invaders went higher and higher without encountering resistance, Tanton allowed himself to hope anew.

They reached the top abruptly, coming to the head of a staircase and finding themselves on a circular platform just under the roof of the building. The platform ran around a giant opening. A steel railing was built thereon to keep the unwary from tumbling down into a great pit twenty floors deep.

In the center of this pit lay Tanton's assignment; a tremendous silvery ray-tube, anchored at the bottom

and extending upward to almost the level of the platform. Laid out horizontal, the tube would have covered over an acre of ground, and from its curved, silvery top, an invisible ray could be heard as it went out through an opening in the roof to blanket Venusian and explode any missile moving in that direction.

Tanton could not smother the shout of triumph that welled up in his throat as he saw the pile of anti-gravity discs piled on one side of the platform. Certainly he could not have planned things better. Scanning the roof, he stepped to the wall and pushed a lever. Immediately another section of the ceiling drew back to make an opening large enough for comfortable exit. Evidently the platform was also used as a hangar for guards on sky patrol.

Tanton swiftly hauled three of the plates out onto the platform. From a pile lying near the wall, he tossed a pair each of gravity shoes to Ron and Glory.

"Put them on," he shouted. "Then get on the plate and wait for me above the building." As he spoke, he donned a pair of the shoes himself. "As soon as I give the signal," he said to Ron, "send word to the Earth squadron out in space that the ray is destroyed. And don't wait for me. After they get word we've got to get out of here quick or we'll be killed by falling bombs. This whole place is going up in atomic dust."

RON SHOWED Glory how to guide the anti-gravity plate by moving her body. Then he threw the switch and steered her through the roof opening. Swiftly, he set his shoes on his own plate and followed her.

It was after they had cleared the building and were hovering within sight of Tanton, that disaster struck. It came in the form of a dozen guards

who had crept up the stairs and were advancing on Tanton from three directions. They came as silently as clouds because a quick glance at the situation had shown them their problem. The blue Mercurian was there of course to destroy the projector. Therefore they must get their hand on him rather than blast him down, because he stood so close to the edge of the platform that he could easily fall into the pit.

Tanton, intent upon his work, raised his head and saw the men creeping in—but too late. Turning in the heavy gravity shoes, he heard Ron's voice from above.

"Hold it!" Ron yelled. "I'm coming back to help!"

In a matter of seconds, Tanton took in the situation, estimated his chances and made his decision. "Don't come back!" he yelled. "You can't help. Take the girl away and give out the signal! That's an order!"

Ron slanted his plate out of the dive and then, before his horrified eyes, Tanton made a last contribution toward the security of Earth.

Just as the hands of a guard reached out to seize him, he hurled the man backward with a single sweep of his arm and took a step forward. Held down by the heavy shoes, it was a slow step, but there was just time for another.

The second step was into space and Tanton went plunging down into the pit to smash, with his own body, the great tube of the ray projector.

There was an explosion so loud and with such force, that it hurled Ron and Glory far up into the sky. When the plates steadied away Ron looked, grim-lipped, at the white-faced Glory—saw that she was unhurt—and pulled a small sender from his supply packet. He set the dial and a moment later his voice came in on the board of the California Queen, flagship of

Earth's Space Fleet Three:

"Ronald Kratnick—Earth Intelligence to squadron commander. Umbrella destroyed. Umbrella destroyed."

Twice he sent the message and then the clipped, "Message received."

Ron didn't even bother to repocket his sender. He threw it from him and yelled to Glory: "Let's get out of here—and fast! Straight up!"

They reached the glass dome of Venusia in a matter of seconds and now, with the projector destroyed, they were able to go safely through the opening in the dome through which the ray had been allowed to escape.

On they went, ever upward until Ron tilted close to Glory's plate and clamped an oxygen cup over her nose. He had only one cup available and when Venus was lost in the haze beneath them and the heat of the sun was searing their skins, Ron felt his lightheadedness increase and a black curtain began its descent over his brain.

But before he passed out, there was the silver oval of the California Queen hove to, with space-suited rescuers issuing from a porthole.

The last thing Ron remembered was the thin atmosphere heaving and bucking about him as the fleet's bombs smashed down on Venusia and left a great yawning hole in the red forests of the planet.

THE COMFORTS aboard the California Queen were such as to wipe away quickly, the horrors of the Undercity. Ron, seated in the lounge, holding Glory's hand, had been silent for some time. Glory looked up at him and smiled.

"I'm going to leave Intelligence," Ron said.

"That surprises me," Glory replied, "but I'm glad—very glad."

"It's because of *him*."

"I don't understand."

Ron smiled and there was a sadness in the smile. "It's hard to explain, but—well, he was a schemer, a liar, a master of intrigues and there was nothing he wouldn't do to gain his ends. But over and above it all, he was *great*—that's the only word I can think of to describe him. He was willing to give his life for any cause to which he pledged himself, and there is no sterner test of any man than that."

"And that's why you're resigning, darling?"

"No, it's because, after seeing him

operate, I know I can never be better than second grade. I was a school child beside Tanton, and I won't be a second-grade anything. If I can't be the best, I'll drop out."

His smile deepened. "You know—I think I'd make a swell farmer. In fact I think I could be a farmer second to none."

After he'd kissed her, Glory said, "That's wonderful, darling. And I think I could be the best farmer's wife in the Universe."

THE END

MAKE HUMANS WORK!



By H. R. STANTON



DR. NORBERT WIENER, mathematician, communication expert, author on and developer of the theory of *cybernetics* (control in humans and machines) has recently written a book which is causing quite a stir in scientific and social circles. It is called the "Human Use of Human Beings", which title tells perfectly what it is about.

Wiener contends these facts: steam and later electric power released Man from the shackles of his muscles. The electric motor has made human labor less and less necessary since the machine can do things better than the man—in a limited sense. Now, Wiener goes on, a second Industrial Revolution is taking place, a revolution which is more subtle yet more profound than even the replacement of muscle by electricity. This new development lies in the application of "thinking machines" calculating devices, and *automatic* machinery of all kinds. It is caused by the enormous progress made in a number of sciences, but particularly in electronics. Where the electric motor has made muscle power superfluous, the vacuum tube has made brainpower unnecessary!

This is not an exaggeration. We haven't reached the millenium yet, but the handwriting is on the wall. As evidence of this, observe most modern factories, above all, the larger ones where mass production has reached its ultimate. In such a factory you will find an assembly line which is in effect a huge machine which is fed and tended to by human beings doing repetitive tasks, using neither brainpower nor muscles. Wiener argues—and successfully—we believe—that the robotic age is coming down on us. Skill, except in the engineering levels is non-existent—and this

too may vanish eventually as we make our machines self-contained.

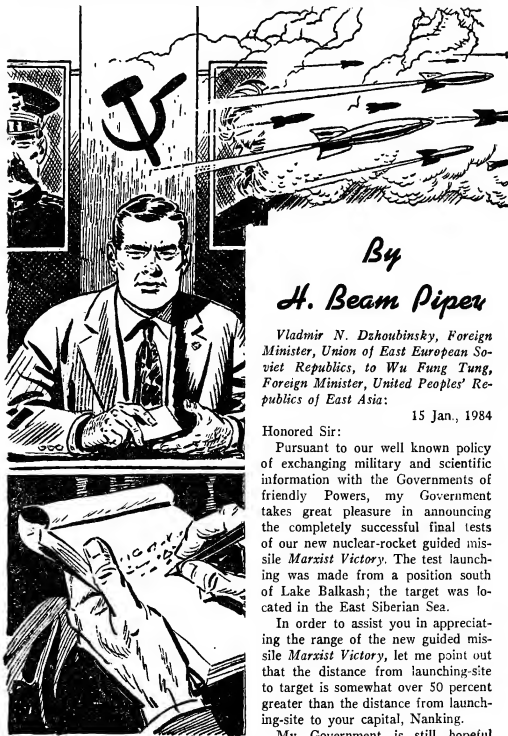
Men have become, Wiener says, debased and depraved because they are no longer using their functions. A craftsman of old worked to the best of his ability. A technician today exerts a tiny fraction of potential ability at his task. Wiener says we are becoming the attendants of robots, and our society is going to have to face this problem. It is with us now, to a certain extent. Within decades it will be overwhelmingly important. What will enable men to regain their dignity?

You cannot expect a human being to put a nut on a bolt and touch it with a mechanical driver day in and day out, year in and year out, without that person becoming little more than a gear in the machine he is serving. With the application of electronics to business machines, to every phase of human endeavor, this process goes more to completion. What is the end? Are we to become nothing but robots?

Wiener is sounding the warning. Wiener is in the forefront of the very development of the thing he fears. That old science-fiction theme of Man being overwhelmed by the Frankenstein machines and robots he makes, is not fantasy nor a joke. It is here—and now! Frantically, men are looking around for a way out, a way to restore human dignity—and yet retain the advantages and living standards that the machine gives.

What the solution is we don't know. But one must be found. The machines we make bear an astonishing resemblance to humans in their function. *But they are not human.* The Man is more important than the machine—we mustn't forget that!

OPERATION R.S.V.P.



By

H. Beam Piper

Vladmir N. Dzhibinsky, Foreign Minister, Union of East European Soviet Republics, to Wu Fung Tung, Foreign Minister, United Peoples' Republics of East Asia:

15 Jan., 1984

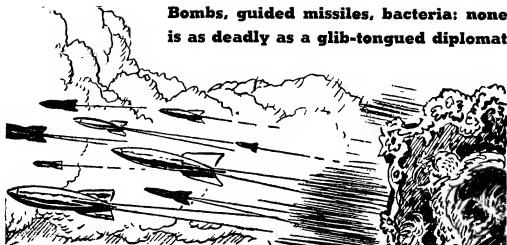
Honored Sir:

Pursuant to our well known policy of exchanging military and scientific information with the Governments of friendly Powers, my Government takes great pleasure in announcing the completely successful final tests of our new nuclear-rocket guided missile *Marxist Victory*. The test launching was made from a position south of Lake Balkash; the target was located in the East Siberian Sea.

In order to assist you in appreciating the range of the new guided missile *Marxist Victory*, let me point out that the distance from launching-site to target is somewhat over 50 percent greater than the distance from launching-site to your capital, Nanking.

My Government is still hopeful

**Bombs, guided missiles, bacteria: none
is as deadly as a glib-tongued diplomat**



that your Government will revise its present intransigent position on the Khakum River dispute.

I have the honor, etc., etc., etc.,
V. N. Dzhibbinsky

*Wu Fung Tung, to Vladimir N.
Dzhibbinsky:*

7 Feb., 1984

Estimable Sir:

My Government was most delighted to learn of the splendid triumph of your Government in developing the new guided missile *Marxist Victory*, and at the same time deeply relieved. We had, of course, detected the release of nuclear energy incident to the test, and inasmuch as it had obviously originated in the disintegration of a quantity of Uranium 235, we had feared that an explosion had occurred at your Government's secret uranium plant at Khatanga. We have long known of the lax security measures in effect at this plant, and have, as a consequence, been expecting some disaster there.

I am therefore sure that your Government will be equally gratified to learn of the perfection, by my Government, of our own new guided missile *Celestial Destroyer*, which em-



bodies, in greatly improved form, many of the features of your own Government's guided missile *Marxist Victory*. Naturally, your own scientific warfare specialists have detected the release of energy incident to the explosion of our own improved thorium-hafnium interaction bomb; this bomb was exploded over the North Polar ice cap, about two hundred miles south of the Pole, on about 35 degrees East Longitude, almost due north of your capital city of Moscow. The launching was made from a site in Thibet.

Naturally, my Government cannot deviate from our present just and reasonable attitude in the Khakum River question. Trusting that your Government will realize this, I have the honor to be,

Your obedient and respectful servant,
Wu Fung Tung

From N. Y. TIMES, Feb 20, 1984:
AFGHAN RULER FETED AT
NANKING

Ameer Shere Ali Abdallah Confers
With
UPREA Pres. Sung Li-Yin

*UEESR Foreign Minister Dzhe-
binsky to Maxim G. Krylenkoff, Am-
bassador at Nanking:*

3 March, 1984

Comrade Ambassador:

It is desired that you make immediate secret and confidential repeat secret and confidential inquiry as to the whereabouts of Dr. Dimitri O. Voronoff, the noted Soviet rocket expert, designer of the new guided missile *Marxist Victory*, who vanished a week ago from the Josef Vissarionovitch Djugashvili Reaction-Propulsion Laboratories at Molotovgorod. It is feared in Government circles that this noted scientist has been abducted by agents of the United Peoples' Repub-

lics of East Asia, possibly to extract from him, under torture, information of a secret technical nature.

As you know, this is but the latest of a series of such disappearances, beginning about five years ago, when the Khakum River question first arose.

Your utmost activity in this matter is required.

Dzhoubinsky

*Ambassador Krylenkoff to Foreign
Minister Dzhebinsky:*

9 March, 1984

Comrade Foreign Minister:

Since receipt of yours of 3/3/84, I have been utilizing all resources at my disposal in the matter of the noted scientist D. O. Voronoff, and availing myself of all sources of information, e.g., spies, secret agents, disaffected elements of the local population, and including two UPREA Cabinet Ministers on my payroll. I regret to report that results of this investigation have been entirely negative. No one here appears to know anything of the whereabouts of Dr. Voronoff.

At the same time, there is considerable concern in UPREA Government circles over the disappearances of certain prominent East Asian scientists, e.g., Dr. Hong Foo, the nuclear physicist; Dr. Hin Yang-Woo, the great theoretical mathematician; Dr. Mong Shing, the electronics expert. I am informed that UPREA Government sources are attributing these disappearances to us.

I can only say that I am sincerely sorry that this is not the case.

Krylenkoff

Wu Fung Tung to Vladimir N. Dzhebinsky:

21 April, 1984

Estimable Sir:

In accordance with our established policy of free exchange with friendly Powers of scientific information, per-

mit me to inform your Government that a new mutated disease-virus has been developed in our biological laboratories, causing a highly contagious disease similar in symptoms to bubonic plague, but responding to none of the treatments for this latter disease. This new virus strain was accidentally produced in the course of some experiments with radioactivity.

In spite of the greatest care, it is feared that this virus has spread beyond the laboratory in which it was developed. We warn you most urgently of the danger that it may have spread to the UESR; enclosed are a list of symptoms, etc.

My Government instructs me to advise your Government that the attitude of your Government in the Khakum River question is utterly unacceptable, and will require considerable revision before my Government can even consider negotiation with your Government or the subject.

Your obedient and respectful servant,
Wu Fung Tung

From N. Y. Times, May 12, 1984:

AFGHAN RULER FETED AT MOSCOW

Ameer sees Red Square Troop Review;

Confers with Premier-President Mouzorgin

Sing Yat, UPREA Ambassador at Moscow, to Wu Fung Tung:

26 June, 1984

Venerable and Honored Sir:

I regret humbly that I can learn nothing whatever about the fate of the learned scholars of science of whom you inquire, namely: Hong Foo, Hin Yang-Woo, Mong Shing, Yee Ho Li, Wong Fat, and Bao Hu-Shin. This inability may be in part due to incompetence of my unworthy self, but none of my many sources

of information, including Soviet Minister of Police Morgodoff, who is on my payroll, can furnish any useful data whatever. I am informed, however, that the UESR Government is deeply concerned about similar disappearances of some of the foremost of their own scientists, including Voronoff, Jirnikov, Kagorinoff, Bakhorin, Himmelfarber and Pavlovinsky, all of whose dossiers are on file with our Bureau of Foreign Intelligence. I am further informed that the Government of the UESR ascribes these disappearances to our own activities.

Ah, Venerable and Honored Sir, if this were only true!

Kindly condescend to accept compliments of,

Sing Yat

Dzhoubinsky to Wu Fung Tung:
6 October, 1984

Honored Sir:

Pursuant to our well known policy of exchanging scientific information with the Governments of friendly Powers, my Government takes the greatest pleasure in announcing a scientific discovery of inestimable value to the entire world. I refer to nothing less than a positive technique for liquidating rats as a species.

This technique involves treatment of male rats with certain types of hard radiations, which not only renders them reproductively sterile but leaves the rodents so treated in full possession of all other sexual functions and impulses. Furthermore, this condition of sterility is venereally contagious, so that one male rat so treated will sterilize all female rats with which it comes in contact, and these, in turn, will sterilize all male rats coming in contact with them. Our mathematicians estimate that under even moderately favorable circumstances, the entire rat population of the world could be sterilized from one

male rat in approximately two hundred years.

Rats so treated have already been liberated in the granaries at Odessa; in three months, rat-trappings there have fallen by 26.4 percent, and grain-losses to rats by 32.09 percent.

We are shipping you six dozen sterilized male rats, which you can use for sterilization stock, and, by so augmenting their numbers, may duplicate our own successes.

Curiously enough, this effect of venereally contagious sterility was discovered quite accidentally, in connection with the use of hard radiations for human sterilization (criminals, mental defectives, etc.). Knowing the disastrous possible effects of an epidemic of contagious human sterility, all persons so sterilized were liquidated as soon as the contagious nature of their sterility had been discovered, with the exception of a dozen or so convicts, who had been released before this discovery was made. It is believed that at least some of them have made their way over the border and into the territory of the United Peoples' Republics of East Asia. I must caution your Government to be on the lookout of them. Among a people still practicing ancestor-worship, an epidemic of sterility would be a disaster indeed.

My Government must insist that your Government take some definite step toward the solution of the Khakum River question; the present position of the Government of the United Peoples' Republics of East Asia on this subject is utterly unacceptable to the Government of the Union of East European Soviet Republics, and must be revised very considerably.

I have the honor, etc., etc.,

Vladmir N. Dzhoubinsky

Coded radiogram, Dzhoubinsky to

Krylenkoff:

25 OCTOBER, 1984

ASCERTAIN IMMEDIATELY
CAUSE OF RELEASE OF NUCLEAR
ENERGY VICINITY OF
NOVA ZEMBLA THIS AM

DZHOUBINSKY

*Coded radiogram, Wu Fung Tung
to Sing Yat:*

25 OCTOBER, 1984

ASCERTAIN IMMEDIATELY
CAUSE OF RELEASE OF NUCLEAR
ENERGY VICINITY OF NOVA
ZEMBLA THIS AM

WU

*Letter from the Ameer of Afghanistan
to UESR Premier-President
Mouzzorgin and UPREA President
Sung Li-Yin:*

26 October, 1984

SHERE ALI ABDALLAH, Ameer of Afghanistan, Master of Kabul, Lord of Herat and Kandahar, Keeper of Khyber Pass, Defender of the True Faith, Servant of the Most High and Sword-Hand of the Prophet; Ph. D. (Princeton); Sc. B. (Massachusetts Institute of Technology); M. A. (Oxford): to their Excellencies A.A. Mouzzorgin, Premier-President of the Union of East European Soviet Republics, and Sung Li-Yin, President of the United Peoples' Republics of East Asia,

Greetings, in the name of Allah!

For the past five years, I have watched, with growing concern, the increasing tensions between your Excellencies' respective Governments, allegedly arising out of the so-called Khakum River question. It is my conviction that this Khakum River dispute is the utterly fraudulent device by which both Governments hope to create a pretext for the invasion of India, each ostensibly to rescue that unhappy country from the rapacity of the other. Your Excellencies

must surely realize that this is a contingency which the Government of the Kingdom of Afghanistan cannot and will not permit; it would mean nothing short of the national extinction of the Kingdom of Afghanistan, and the enslavement of the Afghan people.

Your Excellencies will recall that I discussed this matter most urgently on the occasions of my visits to your respective capitals of Moscow and Nanking, and your respective attitudes, on those occasions, has firmly convinced me that neither of your Excellencies is by nature capable of adopting a rational or civilized attitude toward this question. It appears that neither of your Excellencies has any intention of abandoning your present war of mutual threats and blackmail until forced to do so by some overt act on the part of one or the other of your Excellencies' Governments, which would result in physical war of pan-Asiatic scope and magnitude. I am further convinced that this deplorable situation arises out of the megalomaniac ambitions of the Federal Governments of the UEESR and the UPREA, respectively, and that the different peoples of what you unblushingly call your "autonomous" republics have no ambitions except, on a rapidly diminishing order of probability, to live out their natural span of years in peace. Therefore:

In the name of ALLAH, the Merciful, the Compassionate: We, Shere Ali Abdallah, Ameer of Afghanistan, etc., do decree and command that the political entities known as the Union of East European Soviet Republics and the United Peoples' Republics of East Asia respectively are herewith abolished and dissolved into their constituent autonomous republics, each one of which shall hereafter enjoy complete sovereignty within its own

borders as is right and proper.

Now, in case either of you gentlemen feel inclined to laugh this off, let me remind you of the series of mysterious disappearances of some of the most noted scientists of both the UEESR and the UPREA, and let me advise your Excellencies that these scientists are now residents and subjects of the Kingdom of Afghanistan, and are here engaged in research and development work for my Government. These gentlemen were not abducted, as you gentlemen seem to believe; they came here of their own free will, and ask nothing better than to remain here, where they are treated with dignity and honor, given material rewards—riches, palaces, harems, retinues of servants, etc.—and are also free from the intellectual and ideological restraints which make life so intolerable in your respective countries to any man above the order of intelligence of a cretin. In return for these benefactions, these eminent scientists have developed, for my Government, certain weapons. For example:

1.) A nuclear-rocket guided missile, officially designated as the *Sword of Islam*, vastly superior to your Excellencies' respective guided missiles *Marxist Victory* and *Celestial Destroyer*. It should be; it was the product of the joint efforts of Dr. Voronoff and Dr. Bao Hu-Shin, whom your Excellencies know.

2.) A new type of radar-radio-electronic defense screen, which can not only detect the approach of a guided missile, at any velocity whatever, but will automatically capture and redirect same. In case either of your Excellencies doubt this statement, you are invited to aim a rocket at some target in Afghanistan and see what happens.

3.) Both the UPREA mutated

virus and the UEESR contagious sterility, with positive vaccines against the former and means of instrumental detection of the latter.

4.) A technique for initiating and controlling the Bethe carbon-hydrogen cycle. We are now using this as a source of heat for industrial and even domestic purposes, and we also have a carbon-hydrogen cycle bomb. Such a bomb, delivered by one of our *Sword of Islam* Mark IV's, was activated yesterday over the Northern tip of Nova Zembla, at an altitude of four miles. I am enclosing photographic reproductions of views of this test, televised to Kabul by an accompanying *Sword of Islam* Mark V observation rocket. I am informed that expeditions have been sent by both the UEESR and the UPREA to investigate; they should find some very interesting conditions. For one thing, they won't need their climbing equipment to get over the Nova Zembla Glacier; the Nova Zembla Glacier isn't there, any more.

5.) A lithium bomb. This has not been tested, yet. A lithium bomb is nothing for a country the size of Afghanistan to let off inside its own borders. We intend making a test with it within the next ten days, however. If your Excellencies will designate a target, which must be at the center of an uninhabited area at least five hundred miles square, the test can be made in perfect safety. If not, I cannot answer the results; that will be in the hands of Allah, Who has ordained all things. No doubt Allah has ordained the destruction of either Moscow or Nanking; whichever city Allah has elected to erase, I will make it my personal responsibility to see to it that the other isn't slighted, either.

However, if your Excellencies decide to accede to my modest and reasonable demands, not later than one

week from today, this test-launching will be cancelled as unnecessary. Of course, that would leave unsettled a bet I have made with Dr. Hong Foo—a star sapphire against his favorite Persian concubine—that the explosion of a lithium bomb will not initiate a chain reaction in the Earth's crust and so disintegrate this planet. This, of course, is a minor consideration, unworthy of Your notice.

Of course, I am aware that both your Excellencies have, in the past, fomented mutual jealousies and suspicions among the several "autonomous" republics under your respective jurisdictions, as an instrument of policy. If these peoples were, at this time, to receive full independence, the present inevitability of a pan-Asiatic war on a grand scale would be replaced only by the inevitability of a pan-Asiatic war by detail. Obviously, some single supra-national sovereignty is needed to maintain peace, and such a sovereignty should be established under some leadership not hitherto associated with either the former UEESR or the former UPREA. I humbly offer myself as President of such a supra-national organization, counting as a matter of course upon the whole-hearted support and co-operation of both your Excellencies. It might be well if both your Excellencies were to come here to Kabul to confer with me on this subject at your very earliest convenience.

The Peace of Allah be upon both your Excellencies!

Shere Ali Abdallah,
Ph. D., Sc. B., M. A.

From *N. Y. Times*, Oct. 30, 1984:

MOUZORGIN, SUN LI-YIN,
FETED AT KABUL
Confer With Ameer;
Discuss Peace Plans
Surprise Developments Seen...

PLAY-BRAIN!



By LESLIE PHELPS



WE SOMETIMES wonder what the playthings of the kids of the future will be like when we consider some of the miraculous gadgets they have to toy with now. Nowadays, Junior has everything from a radar set to a toy atomic scientists' outfit, and ordinary chemistry sets are as ancient as the bow and arrow. With this thought in mind we might suggest a bright idea for some far-seeing manufacture to latch onto.

The thought is stimulated by the fact that a number of miniature "mechanical brains" have been built for both teaching purposes and for the sheer fun of having an electronic toy which can add two and two and almost say "uncle". Why doesn't some manufacturer come on the market with a simple little computing machine consisting of a few relays and batteries and lights and switches, and enable the younger set to get their teeth into what their future will hold a lot of. Actually this is not a joke, and we wouldn't be a bit surprised to read an announcement in the near future that the factory of Joe

Dokes is engaged in producing a computing toy which will add and multiply a few numbers, make signals of one kind or another, and in general cavort about like any self-respecting thinking machine—that was "thinking..."

Along these same lines, it seems to us that alert model makers who have already produced toy jet engines for miniature airplanes, and who have even provided models of rocket bombs, would make an effort to provide the 'teen-agers with a harmless variation on the rocket.

While there are models available, genuine rocket powered types aren't. Probably this is through fear that Junior will launch his twenty inch V-2 through Baumgartner's picture window.

Almost every scientific field has now been touched by the toymakers. Apparently about all that is left is to improve and complicate the kids apparatus. But that may not be so easy either. After all, the kids may turn up with some electromechanical ideas of their own—perhaps even a robot!

THE BOUNCING ENGINE!



By MILTON MATTHEW



SOME YEARS back when U.S. Navy engineers went through a captured German submarine they stumbled on what is called a "free-piston" air compressor. This machine has been known theoretically for a long time, but it was first encountered in practical form then. It consisted essentially of a cylinder in which was a piston, but this piston was not connected to a crankshaft or anything else. It merely slid freely in the cylinder and air-gasoline explosions on one side compressed the air on the other, the piston shuttling back and forth, bounding between columns of gas like a shuttlebug.

Since that time European manufacturers have been producing large numbers of free-piston engines, as air compressors and as primer-movers for driving generators etc. The advantages of this simple design are many and we are getting into the production of the gadget.

It is interesting to note for what a long time a theoretical idea like this one can float around until somebody gets up gumption enough to convert it into a reality. The idea applies elsewhere too. Many devices are on the drafting boards and have been there for a long long time, but manufacturers' inertia prevents them from changing as long as things are satisfacto-

ry. It is surprising to realize how strong this lethargic attitude is. "Good enough for Grampa, good enough for us," many say, failing to realize what advantages they'll obtain by being a little more experimental.

The free-piston engine is only one example. The hot-air engine is another. This gadget is nothing but a steam engine running on hot air. It works and the Dutch are building lots of them because they're cheap and easy to run.

Go right down the line and you can find many many other examples of ideas which are not exploited simply because a thing's good enough—why change? Fortunately the pressures of our economy are now getting to be such that we can't afford to be lackadaisical about anything which might increase efficiency.

The future is predicated upon the principle that things can be improved. Unless we believe that we might as well sit back with a wooden plow. All the science in the world can't change it, if it isn't applied. They call the U.S. a nation of applied scientists instead of "pure scientists". That's o.k. with us. We'll take the comforts and advantages and the living standard that goes along with applied science—we'll take it, and thank you!

NEVER TRUST A MARTIAN!

By E. K. Jarvis





JOHN POST came out of the cafe.
"Get your hands up, you!"

What surprised Post was not the order to get his hands up. Here in this old section of the city of Trego which even the Martians called the

"native quarter", anything not only could happen but usually did. You could get stabbed here, you could get drugged, you could get your throat cut, you could get held up.

But there wasn't a chance in a

million that you could be told, "Get your hands up, you!" by what was unmistakably the voice of a woman.

So when he came out of the cafe and a woman's voice yelled behind him, "Get your hands up, you!" John Post was surprised almost out of his wits.

He started to tell himself he was hearing things, that he was drunk. He also started to turn around to get a look at this woman who was yelling at him to get his hands up.

The act of turning around was a mistake, as it turned out. In the time it took to do so, they came at him from two directions.

The tall bean-pole of a man came at him from behind a loaded cart sitting on the edge of the crowded street. The bean-pole man came from the left and he swung a pair of brass knuckles aimed straight at Post's jaw.

"Oh!" Post thought. He didn't have time to say it. All he meant by the single "Oh!" was that he had met brass knuckles before and knew exactly how they felt when they landed on a man's jaw.

They didn't feel like anything that Post ever wanted to experience again.

As the brass knuckles came at his jaw from the left, he lifted his shoulder and ducked his head to the right. The knuckles went up above his head and accomplished nothing more than knocking his hat off.

Simultaneously, he hit the bean-pole man a jolt in the stomach that doubled him over in the middle. At the same instant, he jerked the man in front of him.

For the very good reason that he had caught a glimpse of the gun the girl was waving around. It was a sten gun.

The sten gun will shoot ninety-nine explosive slugs in the space of five seconds, if operated at full automatic and if the magazine contains that

much ammunition. But nobody ever operates a sten gun at full automatic for the space of five seconds, simply because there is no need for such action if the target is human and can be hit with the first shot.

If the target is human and can be hit with one shot, the other ninety-eight shots are not needed. There is nothing left of the target after the first violently explosive slug hits it.

A simple thing, the sten gun.

As simple as death itself.

The girl had such a gun and was waving it in the air.

"You blasted idiot, if that thing goes off, you'll hurt somebody," Post yelled at her.

"I'm going to hurt you if you don't get your hands up," she answered, trying to draw a bead on him.

"But you'll hit him before you hit me," Post yelled, holding the bean-pole man between the muzzle of the gun and himself.

The girl flinched. She didn't want to hit the bean-pole man. The bean-pole man let out a ripping yell and tried to jerk free. Post held him all the tighter.

At the same moment, the fat waddling gorilla-man coming from the right hit both of them. The gorilla man had had a little farther to come than the bean-pole man. He had arrived late on the scene. But when he got there, he hit like an avalanche sliding forty miles down a mountain.

"Uh!" Post grunted.

THE GORILLA man hit him at full speed, with lowered head and shoulders down. Post and the bean-pole man were hurled across the sidewalk and into the street. They hit the cart and the cart went over, scattering Martian fruits like garbage thrown from a bucket. A shrill volley of Martian profanity cut the air. The owner of the cart promised on

the honor of his mother that he would have the heart's blood of these three cursed aliens who had disturbed him in the proper conduct of his business. It was one thing for aliens from Earth to fight—no Martian would object if all the Earth aliens spent their entire time on Mars cutting each other's throats—but it was quite another thing for these aliens to interfere with a moderately honest Martian who was minding his own affairs and not bothering anybody and only stealing when he got the chance.

Shrill Martian curses promised instant death and destruction.

John Post was not particularly worried about the peddler, nor about the bean-pole man nor even about the gorilla man. But he *was* worried about the girl. And the sten gun.

As he hit the cart, he released his grip on the bean-pole man, who sprawled headlong into the middle of the street where the peddler promptly kicked him in the head. The bean-pole man got to his feet and swung those brass knuckles again.

"Yuck!" the peddler said, as the knuckles connected.

Post shoved the gorilla man. The fellow clawed at him, tried to grab him. Post's fist came up, connected solidly. The gorilla man blinked. Post hit him again.

Simultaneously the sten gun went off, a single shot.

At the sound of that explosion, Post started to throw himself flat on the street. When a sten gun went off every human being in hearing range who had good sense always took evasive action instantly. If you didn't, you might never take it. Post started to throw himself to the ground.

At the same instant he saw that the girl had fired the gun by accident. Fortunately she had had the muzzle pointed skyward at the time she had pulled the trigger with the result that

the explosive slug was racing hell for leather up through the thin air of Mars. It would come down somewhere miles away and either blow some Martian to bits or scare him out of a year's growth.

Which, at the moment, was not important to Post. What was important was the fact that the girl, startled by the shot she had accidentally fired, was looking at the gun. The expression on her face said, "Heavens! what happened? I just pressed it here somewhere and it went off."

Since she was looking at the gun, she wasn't looking at Post.

He changed his fall to a dive straight at her. His outstretched hands caught the sten gun, jerked it from her grasp. At the same time his charge carried her backward straight into the hard stone wall of the building. She gasped, "Oof!" and went down in a flurry of kicking legs which revealed not only very fancy undergarments but some remarkably good-looking legs as well.

"You crazy fool!" Post shouted.

The girl looked up at him from wounded eyes.

THEN HE became aware of something else. All around them there had instantly formed a circle of grinning Martian faces. Fierce eyes glinted at them, tongues went out to lick dry lips as if this sight even tasted good. The faces were swarthy, bronzed red. The eyes and the lips were hungry. Knives were appearing.

If the aliens from Earth wanted to kill each other, the Martians would enjoy nothing more than watching such a pleasant sight. If the fight stopped suddenly before any alien was dead—well, in these circumstances, why shouldn't an honest Martian move in with a knife and help the situation along?

So the Martians would reason.

So they *were* reasoning at this instant!

Post turned his attention to the Martians.

"Freeze, you *framgullions*!" he spoke, in Martian.

One Martian already had a knife out and was starting to move forward. Post shifted the muzzle of the sten gun ever so slightly, shifted it just enough to call attention to the fact that it covered this Martian.

The Martian became aware of the gun. A startled expression passed over his face. His skin started to turn white. His eyes bugged out as he regarded the muzzle of that gun.

He froze. He didn't move a muscle, he didn't blink an eye, he didn't even seem to breathe.

Post took a deep breath. There was sweat on his face and sweat running down under his arms. In a dozen different ways he had been so close to death that he could not at this moment begin to guess why he wasn't dead.

He let that breath out in a harsh burst of sound.

"Beat it! If I even catch a glimpse of one of you after I have counted three, I promise you I will blow your hind end into the middle of next week. Beat it!" He spoke in Martian and every Martian understood him. Every Martian also understood exactly what was expected of him.

"One!" Post shouted, beginning his count.

It was like a herd of cattle stampeding. They went at top speed and they didn't look back. One minute there was a tight close ring of hostile faces and hot eyes surrounding the humans. The next minute the street was deserted. The sound of running feet was coming from the distance.

The bean-pole man and the gorilla man were also trying to beat it.

"Come back here, you two," Post

said. "I didn't mean you."

They came back with their hands high in the air. The expression on their faces was that of licked dogs expecting a beating.

"Well," Post said. "Well!"

Neither of the two men said anything. Like the Martians, they seemed utterly fascinated by the sight of the sten gun. If they had anything to say, it was information each was going to keep completely to himself until asked for it. But if he was asked, he was fully prepared to deliver the information.

Or to deliver anything else that the man with the sten gun wanted.

The girl got slowly to her feet. Her face was white and she was madder than a wet hen. But she wasn't crying. Post looked carefully to make sure. No, there were no traces of tears visible on her brown cheeks.

He liked that. His eyes roved along the street until he found what he wanted.

"There's a joint over there," he said, nodding his head in the direction he meant. "Suppose we all go over and have a drink?"

The expression on the faces of the two men said they would go and go gladly. The girl's face had little expression on it. But her eyes said she would go.

"Okay, let's go," Post said. "And while we're having those drinks, you three can tell me exactly why in hell you tried so blasted hard to kill me!"

CHAPTER II

"I DIDN'T try to kill you," the girl protested, over and over again. "I swear I didn't. Killing was the last thing I wanted to do to you although—"

Post glanced sideways at Bean-pole and Gorilla. He looked down in his lap at the sten gun there. It struck

him that he did not know the names of any of these people, and that possibly they might not know his name either, that this might be a case of mistaken identity. But there was one factor in the situation about which there could be no mistake—the sten gun. You used this weapon only when you intended to kill.

"I swear I didn't," the girl insisted. "I didn't think that even John Post would have the courage to resist a person who had covered him with a sten gun!"

"Oh, you know who I am?"

"Of course I know."

"*But I didn't!*" The words literally burst from Bean-pole's lips. Across on the other side of the table in the secluded booth, Bean-pole looked as if he was about to explode. His eyes were bugging out of his head and his Adam's apple was jumping up and down. "Are—are you actually Johnny Post?"

"Yeah," Post said. "What's eating you?"

"Good God, I tackled Johnny Post!" Bean-pole gasped. The expression on his face said that he felt he had committed a mortal sin. Tremors passed up and down his body. His hand holding the glass on the table top began to jump. The glass jumped with it, making a harsh rattling sound. "I swear I didn't know it, Johnny!" Bean-pole whispered, agony on his face. "I swear I didn't. *She* didn't tell us it was you we were to tackle. She just said there was a guy she wanted to hire us to take. She said his name was John Smith, or something like that. I didn't know it was Johnny Post. She lied to us, Johnny, I swear she did. Johnny, you got to believe us."

Post stared at this evidence of his reputation coming from the lips and the face of Bean-pole. In every way he knew how, Bean-pole was trying to

say that tackling John Post was about the last act any man in command of his senses would try to undertake.

"Honest, Johnny, you got to believe me. I've heard about you, I know about you! I wouldn't have done it, Johnny, if I had knowed it was you! I wouldn't have done it under no circumstances."

"Well," Post said. "Thanks for the boost." He glanced sideways at the girl. "Did you sort of maybe lie a little to these men?"

"Tell him you lied!" Bean-pole pleaded.

THE GIRL'S face looked wretched.

"I lied," she said, "From what I have heard of you, I was afraid they wouldn't help me, if they knew it was you they were after. So I didn't tell them the truth."

"I oughta turn you over my knee and spank your britches for you!" Bean-pole growled.

"The lady has admitted she lied," Post said. "We ought to let it drop at that, don't you think?"

Bean-pole's adam's-apple jumped up and down. "Anything you say, Johnny," he said fervidly.

Gorilla was making the same kind of noises, was insisting that he, too, had not known the identity of John Post.

"Forget it," Post said.

The expression on Gorilla's face said there was nothing in the universe he would be more glad to forget.

Post turned to the girl. "You were starting to say something. You said: '*Killing was the last thing I wanted to do to you although—*' How about finishing that sentence?"

The girl's face said she didn't want to finish it. "Go on," Post said. "What comes after that *although*?"

"*Although* that is exactly what you deserve!" the girl shot the words at him.

For a moment, he didn't know what to say. He tried hastily to think over his past life and recall things he had done that deserved killing. He had whipped a few men. *They* might think he deserved killing for that but they wouldn't be likely to tackle the job and even less likely to send a girl to do it for them. He had killed a few men. But he had had to kill them, he had never killed a man in any way except in a fair fight. So far as he knew, dead men wouldn't be sending anybody to kill him.

The whole thing made less than no sense to him. He shook his head. "It beats me. Why do I deserve killing, sweetheart?"

"Because of what you did to Slug Hardesty!" the girl said defiantly. "And don't call me sweetheart."

"My God, this gets madder and madder!" Post gasped. "Because of what I did to Slug Hardesty? I didn't do a damned thing to Slug Hardesty. Slug Hardesty happens to be my best friend. I would back him with my life any old day in the week. He would back me on the same terms. As a matter of fact, I'm here in Trego right now trying to find out exactly—" He checked himself abruptly. If he was dealing with a mad woman—and any woman who accused him of harming Slug Hardesty was certainly as mad as the Hatter in *Alice in Wonderland*—maybe he ought not to tell too much about his reasons for being here in Trego. "What do you mean: '*Because of what I did to Slug Hardesty*?' Speak your piece and speak it fast. What did I do to Slug Hardesty?"

For a moment the girl's face faltered as if some inner doubt had come upon her. Then again she was spitting out words.

"Because you betrayed him, you double-crossed him, you went off and left him to—to—to die!" She blub-

bered out the words at the end. "You double-crossed him and left him to die, that's what you did!"

"I did *that*?" Post was now sure he was dealing with a mad woman. "Bless me, sweetheart, when you say those words you really beat hell out of me. Didn't you know that Slug and I are pals? I mean, real pals?"

"You were, once," the girl blubbered. "That was before you double-crossed him!"

POST GLANCED sideways at Bean-Pole. "Did you ever hear of Johnny Post double-crossing a pal?" he said.

"Never in my life!" Bean-pole said firmly.

"Did *you* ever hear of such a thing?" Post said to Gorilla.

"No, and I ain't expecting ever to hear about it, either," Gorilla answered.

Post turned to the girl. "You're the only person who has ever heard of such a thing as that. And what does that make you, sweetheart?"

"I don't know what it makes me," the girl blubbered. "But it's the truth, so help me God. It's the truth."

"Hell on wheels!" Post said, awed in spite of himself. "You say that as if you mean it."

"I do mean it."

"But how can you mean it?" he protested. "Say, who are you anyhow?"

"Eden Hardesty," she answered.

John Post had always thought that nothing on Earth or on Mars could surprise him. But he was surprised now, probably more startled than he had ever been in all his life. "No!" he burst out. "You can't be Eden, Slug's kid sister. If he has told me about you once, he has told me about you a million times. But you're not Slug's sister, you can't be. You're not here on Mars, you're on Earth—"

"I landed on the last rocket, about two weeks ago," the girl said.

Post took a deep breath. There was a slight giddiness in him, he had the dim impression that the room was going round and round. He forced the giddiness out of him. "But how could Eden Hardesty, of all people in this solar system, accuse me of double-crossing Slug Hardesty?"

She was fumbling with the strap purse hanging from her shoulder. She got it open and took from it a square of the rough gray paper the Martians manufacture. It was an envelope, he saw, with her name and the address of a hotel scrawled on it. The name and the address were in the sprawling writing of Slug Hardesty. Inside was a sheet of crumpled paper, with more of the same sprawled writing on it.

"Dear Sis:

I know you are coming by the next rocket so I am bribing a native to get this letter to the hotel where you will stay.

Sis, I need help, bad. You're the only person I can trust so I am turning to you. That dirty Johnny knows where I am and he could help me if he would, but he double-crossed me and got me in this jam in the first place.

Come to the Martian temple city called Jedvark and look up the high priest, Sumarez. Sumarez is my friend and he will be your friend. He will help you find me.

Sis, if I don't get help pretty soon, I'm a dead duck and that's for sure.

*Love,
Your brother"*

The signature scrawled at the bottom of the note was unquestionably that of Slug Hardesty.

POST FINISHED the note and shoved it across the table to the girl. "Eden, if I'd a been in your place with that note in my pocket and a sten gun in my hand, I would probably have used the gun."

"Well?" Eden Hardesty challenged. "Is the note true?"

"The note is true enough," Post answered. "But the facts it relates aren't true."

"What do you mean?"

"I didn't double-cross Slug Hardesty. In fact, I was having a heck of a time keeping from figuring it the other way around."

"I don't understand."

"My big job was to keep from thinking that Slug had double-crossed me!"

The girl's eyes were fastened on his face. "How can you say that, Mr. Post?"

"I'll tell you how I could have figured it. Slug and I were up in Jedvark all right, the whole town is really nothing but a bunch of temples way up in the hills. We were up there at the invitation of the high priest, that Martian Sumarez Slug mentioned in his note. We were up there doing just one thing, trying to locate some treasure the priests claim was buried, lost or hidden over a thousand years ago."

"How could you find this lost treasure when the priests hadn't been able to find it in a thousand years?" the girl shot at him.

Post was unruffled. "Easy enough. We took with us a gadget that the priests had never seen before. They thought it was pure magic. But Slug and I knew it was nothing except a development of the old magnetic detector they've been using on Earth for quite a spell. We were using this detector and trying to find the treasure with it."

"I see." Comprehension showed on the face of Eden Hardesty. Across the

table both Bean-pole and Gorilla were getting bug-eyed again, this time at the story Post was telling. Post glanced at them and noticed the eager way in which they were following the story.

"What happened then?" the girl continued.

Post spread his hands. "Why, Slug up and vanished. He disappeared. He went away in thin air. He was there with me one night; when I woke up the next morning, he was gone."

"He deserted you?" Horror sounded in the girl's voice.

"Well, no, I didn't say that. He just went away. But he went away just after we had gotten some mighty exciting readings on the magnetic detector, and when he went away, *he took the detector with him.*"

The horror was on the girl's face now. "Oh, I don't believe it, I simply don't believe it."

"I don't believe it, either," Post answered. "I don't believe Slug went away of his own free will."

"Why did he go away then?"

"I kinda suspect maybe somebody slipped him a dose of what the Martians call *spico.*"

ACROSS the table, the faces of Bean-pole and Gorilla said they understood everything now. But Eden Hardesty didn't seem to understand.

"What's *spico*?"

"It's a drug the Martians have. It's a most peculiar drug. It sort of turns a man completely around in his mind. It makes him think, for instance, that his best friend is his worst enemy. It's a known fact that after taking a little *spico* a man has been known to slip up behind his best friend and kill him."

"Is—can this be true?"

"So help me, it can be true. So help me, it has happened."

"And you think that Slug was given

some of this drug?"

"Nothing else makes any sense to me," Post answered. "Slug wouldn't take our magnetic detector and slip away in the night, if he was in his right mind. He wouldn't say I had double-crossed him, if he was in his right mind. *He'd know better.* Just as I know he didn't double-cross me."

His tone was light but something about it seemed to carry conviction. The girl was beginning to believe him. Bean-pole and Gorilla had always believed him. Anything he chose to say, they would believe.

"What did you do then?" the girl asked.

Post spread his hands again. "Just staying alive around these Martians is a two-man job. While one man works, the second man keeps watch to make certain nobody slips up behind the man who is working and slams a knife in his back. I couldn't stay in Jedvark without Slug, or somebody. I would have to sleep sometime. Sooner or later, no matter what I did, I wouldn't wake up. So I came back here to Trego—for two reasons."

"What reasons?"

"One was to get another magnetic detector. Those priests made a fair and square contract with me and they're going to keep it. The second reason was to find somebody to watch not only while I worked, but also while I looked around for Slug."

The girl's face brightened. "Would you take me to Jedvark, to watch while you work and look?"

Post's heart jumped. He hadn't really expected this but he knew, the instant it happened, that he ought to have expected it. This girl was Slug Hardesty's sister, wasn't she? Sure, she would want to help.

"It's a deal, Eden."

A glow appeared in the girl's eyes. "When do we start?"

"As soon as we arrange one other thing."

"What?"

"As soon as we can find a couple of other people to go along and help watch and help look."

"A couple of other people—" The girl seemed confused.

Post's eyes went across the table. Bean-pole's adam's-apple was already working. "Count me in, Johnny. Count me in. I'll go with you to Jedvark, or to hell."

"Count me in too," Gorilla was echoing "With you I'll go to Jedvark, or to any other place on this blasted planet."

"Good," Post said. "We'll start for Jedvark in the morning."

CHAPTER III

SUMAREZ, the high priest of the temple city of Jedvark, received them in a thundering, roaring, spitting rage.

"Who are these people with you?" he screamed at Post, pointing at Eden Hardesty, at Bean-pole, and at Gorilla. "I gave you no permission to bring others here. Why did you bring them here?"

"Because I need somebody to stand guard while I'm working," Post answered, unperturbed. "I wouldn't want a knife in my back, for instance."

"A knife?" the hot hawk eyes of Sumarez seemed to withdraw inward for a moment. For a Martian, Sumarez was tall. His skin was drawn tight over a face that seemed all bone, like wet parchment stretched over a skull and then allowed to dry there. "But you will want to cut them in. I will not allow it. Not for one moment, will I allow it." He became almost incoherent with rage. He was speaking in rapid Martian.

"Oh, so that's what's biting you,"

Post said. "Our agreement was that Slug Hardesty and I were to get half of everything we found, you and your priests to get the other half. That agreement still holds. What I will do with my share is my business. If I wish to cut these people in, you don't have much to say about it!"

"Oh, I see. I thought you were trying to demand that they share equally. But you aren't. That is different." Sumarez seemed to become much easier in his mind. Then he was angry again. "But where have you been? Where is this human—Hardesty? Where is the magic detector which will find the treasure? Where—"

"One question at a time," Post answered. "I have been to Trego, to get another magic detector. As to where Slug is, that is one of the questions I want answered."

"You do not know where he is?" Surprise showed on the parchment-covered skull that Sumarez used for a face. "I thought he went with you. I didn't know where you went. I thought both of you had gone together. I thought you had perhaps found—"

"The treasure?" Post supplied. "Well, it happens you are not thinking very good these days." He explained what had happened.

"Then Hardesty is gone?" Sumarez screamed. "He has taken the magic detector and has been using it himself, thinking thus to get the treasure for himself—"

Post cleared his throat. "I said you weren't thinking very good these days, Sumarez. Slug and the detector are both gone. But Slug doesn't double-cross his pals."

"Then what *did* happen?"

"We think maybe somebody slipped him a little *spico*," Post answered.

"*Spico*?" The priest's mouth hung open with surprise. He spat out

words. "That Girondel. I'll have his throat cut before morning."

"Girondel?"

"Yes. If Hardesty was drugged, Girondel did it. And for one purpose. He hopes to get the entire treasure for himself. I will have his throat cut as soon as I can arrange it. You continue with your search. I will take care of Girondel."

"Taking care of Girondel may be a little tough, huh?" Post said.

Sumarez looked blank. "He has a certain following, I admit. But I will take care of *him*. Begin anew your search for the lost treasure of Jedvark. Begin at once. Do you understand? Take your new magic detector and begin at once!"

POST LIT a cigarette. He looked thoughtfully at the high priest. Sumarez was sitting in a big chair that was more nearly a throne. A Martian page stood on either side, ready to run at his bidding. "I'm not in quite as big a hurry as you are," Post said slowly.

"But—" Sumarez sputtered.

"I guess maybe our sense of values is different," Post said. "You want this lost treasure. And that's important, I admit. But there's one thing I want more."

"What is that? You will get it, at once. Is it a group of special guards?"

"No special guards. What I want is Slug Hardesty."

Behind him, he heard Eden Hardesty take a deep breath. It was as if she hadn't been breathing up until then.

"But he is gone. You say yourself he is gone."

"Yeah. But I want him."

"Well, find him." Sumarez spread his hands in a gesture which indicated that to his mind these aliens from across space were all crazy. Putting a man ahead of money! Who had

ever heard of such a thing? "You have my permission to hunt for him, if he is still alive."

"I want a little more than your permission; I want your help," Post said.

"But—"

"I kind of doubt that I'll ever be able to find that treasure without Slug there to help me. I'm superstitious, maybe."

"But you *have* to find it. You have to begin searching immediately. I order you—"

Post moved the sten gun from its comfortable niche on his left arm. "I want Slug," he said. "I want him fast." He turned, moved away without bothering to ask permission. "Come on, guys," he said to the others.

They moved out of the audience room where Sumarez had received them, out to a long wide porch-balcony that encircled the entire building. Around them, rising up the side of the mountain, was the city of Jedvark. "We actually think the treasure is hidden in the caves under this temple," Post said. "The whole mountain is honey-combed with caves and passages. Something is down there in one spot which sure sets off a magnetic detector. Trouble was—Slug and I couldn't ever pick exactly the right spot. Something funny, something we couldn't get at." He frowned at the thought of his experiences down there in the caves under the temple.

From an open window behind and above him, he caught a flicker of movement. "Down," he yelled.

He and the others went flat instantly.

The thrown knife whistled through the air. It struck the stone floor and rattled along it, reached the edge of the balcony and slid off.

POST HAD turned and covered the window with the sten gun. The

knife had come from there. It had been aimed at him.

The window was open and empty. No curious face appeared in it.

"Somebody tried to kill you!" Eden Hardesty gasped.

"Sure did," Post answered. He glanced at her, saw she was shocked and scared.

"Don't worry about it, Eden. You'll get used to things like that around here." He forced a grin to his face, but was far from feeling the grin inside. He knew, and knew it beyond the shadow of a doubt, that as long as they stayed here in this city of Jedvark, death would be his constant companion.

Death from a knife, death from any of the poisons the Martians were so ingenious in brewing, death from a falling rock in the caves under the temple, death in any of a thousand ways, would always be waiting for a moment of inattention, for one careless slip.

"Who threw that knife?" Bean-pole asked.

"Any of the thousands of Martians who live here," Post answered.

"But why?" Gorilla questioned. Sweat was oozing from the fat man's face.

"For any reason or for no reason," Post said. "It might have been that some Martian was trying to kill me, for a specific reason known only to himself. Or it might have been that some Martian just thought he saw a good chance to kill a damned Earth alien."

"Not a nice place," Eden Hardesty murmured.

"You can say that again," Post said. "Well, we'll head below."

"Aren't you going to try to find out who threw that knife?" Eden protested.

"No. I'm just going to keep my eyes open and put a slug in him the

next time he tries it." He patted the stock of the stumpy little sten gun as he spoke.

Eden also had a sten gun, the one he had taken from her in Trego. Bean-pole and Gorilla were armed with automatic pistols and knives. They looked like two pirates straight out of the days of Captain Kidd. In addition to the weapons, Gorilla carried a compact little instrument which was a magnetic detector. Bean-pole carried the batteries and the wires.

They moved from the gallery down a long flight of steps. Martians passed them, glanced at them from surly, smouldering eyes, but did not offer any insults. They passed through an open door and into the beginning of a series of underground passages. Smouldering wall torches provided a dim illumination. In the pack at his back, Post had a heavy-duty flashlight, as did all the others. Post got out his light, the others did likewise. "Keep your eyes peeled in all directions and your ears open," Post said. "If I say 'Drop!' hit the dirt on the double."

"I—I won't have any trouble doing that," Bean-pole spoke, staring around at the dark and gloomy passages through which they were moving.

"Pretty soon we'll come to a huge room," Post said. "It's a big place and, believe it or not, there's a system of mirrors that leads clear to the outside and which pipe down light. The Martians call this room the *place of light—isthvog*, in their language. Slug and I never did quite figure out what the place was originally—whether a thousand or maybe a couple of thousand of years ago, this place of light was a secret temple or a secret workshop." His voice ran into silence as he considered again the vast mystery that he had always sensed in this place.

"What kind of a workshop would they have had here?" Eden asked.

"We were never certain it *was* a workshop. But there is some evidence to indicate that these Martians were pretty good scientists a long, long time ago. We think this place may have been a kind of a secret hide-out of a group of temple scientists and that they may have used it as a workshop. There's some funny stuff in the *place of light*, stuff we didn't understand. We'll be there soon. The treasure is hidden somewhere in *this place of light*, which is why we are going there."

AHEAD OF them a glimmer of light appeared. As they moved forward, the light grew stronger. They came to an arch which opened out into a huge room. Light poured from a circle of mirrors on the huge ceiling, providing a soft but brilliant illumination over the entire scene. Off to the left was a cluster of statuary. The Martians who had built this place had been artists of a sort. In the center of the room the light came splashing straight downward into a series of reflecting mirrors which flung it up again.

"It looks like a waterfall of light," Eden whispered.

"So it does," Post whispered. "And it is around that waterfall of light that our detectors begin to go crazy—" He broke off to stare at the object sitting on the stone floor beside the waterfall of light.

There, the parts of a magnetic detector strewn around him, lifting his head to stare toward them, an expression of dazed bewilderment on his face, was Slug Hardesty.

At the sight, Eden uttered a little cry of gladness and thanksgiving and went running forward.

"Stop!" Post shouted.

"That's my brother," she answered.

"Stay here and keep watch," Post said, to the two men. He followed the girl, on the run.

She had reached her brother before he could catch her.

"Sis!" Slug Hardesty's voice sounded hoarse and strained. He rose to his feet, clasped his sister in his arms. Then he looked over her at John Post, approaching on the run.

"Give me that sten gun," Post heard Slug Hardesty say to his sister. "I've got a snake to kill."

Then Slug and his sister were struggling for possession of the sten gun. Slug Hardesty's simple straightforward purpose was to get the gun into his possession so he could use it to kill John Post.

CHAPTER IV

"GIVE ME that gun, Sis!"

"No, Slug! Please." She clung to the gun as if her life depended on retaining her grip on the weapon. Her brother tried to jerk it from her grasp. Normally, it would have been no contest. He was many times stronger than she and he should have torn the gun from her hands in spite of anything she could have done to prevent it.

But she held on, somehow, until Post got there.

Post jerked the gun from both of them. "Easy, Slug," he said. "Easy, old man."

He faced a wild man. His face contorted with rage and hate, Hardesty swung a looping right at him. The slowness with which that right moved surprised John Post, and told him something. He had seen this man throw too many punches to have any doubt as to their efficiency under normal circumstances. Post moved his head to one side and let the blow go past him. Hardesty stumbled forward and fell face down. He got to his knees and glared at Post.

"I'll get you yet, you son—"

His sister ran to him.

He stared at her and suddenly began to cry.

"He's got enough *spico* in him to float a battleship," Post whispered in her ear.

"Are you sure of that?" The girl was frantic and near tears herself.

"Positive. I've seen it before. Just let him cry. He'll be all right."

Hardesty, blubbing and pawing at his eyes, lurched to his feet. Suddenly all animosity was gone from his voice. "Johnny," he whispered. He seemed to know and to remember Post for the first time. "Johnny—"

"Yeah, Slug."

"I've found it."

"You've—" A cold chill shot up Post's spine. "Found what, Slug?"

"I've found the lost treasure. Jewels, red Martian rubies as big as your fist, diamonds like nothing no Earth Rajah ever saw. Gold. Ornaments. Lot of iron stuff, too, Johnny, which was what we were really getting on our detector."

Slug Hardesty had come out of the *spico* trance. He had recognized his old friend. Post, knowing that *spico* was a very peculiar drug, that even the Martians were often scared of it, recalled stories he had heard of Martians who had suddenly come out of a *spico* seizure. One instant, they had been wild. The next instant, for no apparent reason, they had been cold sober.

"Have you really found it, Slug?" Post said. He could feel his heart jumping. Eden had risen to her feet and was staring from one to the other. Slug winked owlishly at her. "Hi, Sis. Sorry I acted up like I did a minute ago. Must have been something wrong with me."

His eyes turned inward and he seemed to seek the source of the strange behaviour in himself. He

shook his head. "I don't get it. But no matter. Johnny, I've really found it."

"Show me, pal."

"Sure thing, Johnny."

Grinning happily, Slug Hardesty took John Post by the arm. Slug radiated happiness from his face, from the tone of his voice. He led Post to the pool of light.

THE POOL was about fifteen feet across and circular in shape. It was possibly two feet deep, or maybe deeper. Mirrors made by some secret process that only the Martians knew ringed it. Concave mirrors were on the bottom. Light came into this pool from up above, was reflected back from mirrors on the ceiling, was reflected back from them to the pool below, performing an endless journey, racing down and up, racing round and round. A milky foam of light seemed to be always present in the pool. Just looking at the foam and into the pool hurt the eyes somehow.

Post had seen the pool many times before. It always kicked up a feeling of pressure somewhere inside his brain. The pressure came back now, his eyes felt twisted and distorted, somehow they seemed to be a little out of focus. He was aware of a feeling of strain.

"Where is it, Slug?" he asked.

Hardesty pointed to the pool. "Down there, Johnny. The pool is filled with it."

"Huh?" Post said.

"Right up to the rim, it's full of diamonds and rubies and golden ornaments. There's billions and billions of dollars of stuff in there." A rapt note of ecstasy sounded in Hardesty's voice.

Post looked at him quickly. Hardesty was staring into the pool. The expression on his face said he was seeing something.

"Look at that blood-red ruby over there!" Hardesty said pointing. "That one little chunk of blood-red stone is worth a million dollars all by itself, or I'm a liar."

"Dear God!" Post breathed.

He caught the expression on Eden's face. She looked hurt, pained, bewildered, lost, and confused. Something was happening that was hurting her. Right down to the bottom of her heart, it hurt. The pain of it was showing in the tight expression on her face. It showed in her eyes as she glanced at Post.

"Johnny," her whisper was so weak he could hardly hear it. "The pool, it's empty, isn't it?"

Post nodded.

He could see the bottom of the pool, the mirrors on the side. There was light in the pool, nothing but light.

Hardesty's eyes came up to Post's face. "You don't believe me, do you, Johnny?" Hardesty sounded pained and hurt too.

Post said nothing. He kept his face wooden, his eyes expressionless. Here was another manifestation of the effect of *spico*—hallucination. That was another effect of the drug, the person who had taken it thought he saw impossible things. There were other effects of the drug too, reputed effects.

"I'll show you, Johnny," Hardesty said. His voice sounded normal, his eyes looked normal. He seemed to be making a simple statement. But he pointed to a spot near the edge of the pool. Calmly he said, "See that ruby there. I'll reach down and pull it out and then you can see for yourself."

Calmly he moved forward, reached out his arm, thrust his hand and his fingers into the pool of light. Post held his breath. Hardesty was acting so normal it was almost impossible to believe he was a victim of hallucina-

tion. He acted like a man who has had an argument with a friend about a pebble in a brook and is reaching into the water of the brook to pull out the pebble and thus settle the argument.

SLUG HARDESTY groped. He reached out to pick up the pebble. For one mad moment, Post had the illusion that something was actually there to be picked up. For a split second, he had the dazed impression that Slug Hardesty was actually going to reach his hand into that pool of light and come out with a ruby in his fingers.

"Damn it, can this be real!" Post burst out.

He watched from dazed eyes.

Hardesty reached for the pebble in the brook. Seemingly he didn't get it the first time. He reached again. Missed again. He reached the third time, a grab now, and brought up his hand—empty.

He stared at that empty hand from dazed eyes, then fell face forward into the pool. Eden screamed. Hardesty hit the bottom and Post had the fleeting impression that light ought to splash out of that pool like water. But no light splashed. At the bottom, Slug Hardesty grunted, rolled over and sat up. He had fallen like a drunk, limp and easy, and was unhurt.

Post dropped into the pool. It was about three feet deep. He lifted Slug Hardesty to his feet, helped him out of the pool of light. "Something wrong, Johnny," Hardesty muttered.

The light in the pool was warm and pleasant. Post had the sensation of tingling movements passing up and down his legs, passing over his body. The light poured over him, bathed him, felt both good and strange.

He swung himself out of the light

like a man swinging himself out of a swimming pool, by catching the edge and throwing himself up over it.

Slug Hardesty sat there on the stone floor, staring over the edge of the pool. "I can see 'em just as plain," he was saying, over and over again. His jaws were sagging and his eyes vacant and expressionless. Eden was kneeling beside him, watching him, trying to talk to him. He didn't seem to know she existed.

"I can see 'em just as plain," he was saying. Tears moved through the weeks-old growth of whiskers on his face, moved through the hollows of his cheeks. Around him on the stone floor were the dismantled parts of the detector.

John Post choked down the sympathy rising in him. He gestured toward the parts of the detector. "Why'd you tear it up, Slug?" His voice was calm and poised, it was deliberately the voice of man asking an utterly unimportant question. This was the only way Post could think of to call Slug Hardesty back to reality, to ask casual questions, to pretend that everything was as it should be.

Slug wiped the tears from his face. "Because the danged thing was nuts," he said.

"Eh? How was it nuts?"

"It kept saying the treasure was here," he gestured toward the pool of light. "I kept seeing the treasure here. But I couldn't reach the treasure, I couldn't touch it. So—the treasure wasn't here. So, the damned detector was lying to me, and that made it nuts. If it was nuts, it was out of order, and if it was out of order, my job was to fix it. Darned things are pretty delicate, you know. Sometimes a little jolt or a jar will throw 'em out of order."

Slug nodded to himself. John Post nodded. There was valid reasoning of a wild type in what Slug Hardesty

said. Post sensed the validity of that reasoning, could not put his finger on the exact source. But most of all, the reasoning seemed to mean that Slug was on his way to recover from the effects of *spico*.

And that was good!

"We'll fix it," Post said, heartily. "Anyhow, we don't need to fix it now. We brought a new detector along with us from Trego. To heck with the old one, we'll use the new one. It'll work fine."

The expression on Slug Hardesty's face said that everything was fine now, all problems were solved. The new detector would enable them to find the treasure. Slug looked very pleased. Eden had a glow of happiness on her face. Her eyes mutely asked Johnny Post if Slug Hardesty wasn't acting better now. Post nodded. The glow on her face deepened, became a silent sort of thanksgiving. She had found two things she wanted, her brother, first. But when she had found him, he had been under the influence of an insidious drug. Now he was getting over the effects of the drug. This was enough to make any girl happy. Tears showed on Eden's face, but they were the tears of happiness now.

Boom!

A single, solitary, crashing shot broke the silence in the place of light, smashed that silence to smithereens. The boom was the report of a heavy pistol.

CHAPTER V

AT THE SOUND of the shot, Johnny Post dropped flat on the stone floor. At the sound of any shot, he would instantly drop flat. Slug Hardesty went flat too. Eden, whose reactions were not yet firmly established, took a second to try and look around. Post's hissed words sent her

to the floor too.

Across the big room the voice of Gorilla bellowed. "Hey, Johnny, we're getting visitors. I took a shot at one of 'em."

"Visitors where?"

"Behind us," Gorilla shouted.

"And over there across the room coming out of a hole on the other side," Bean-pole shouted. A second shot rang out, from Bean-pole's gun this time. The bullet whistled through the air above Post's head, smashed against the stone wall opposite.

"There's more of 'em behind us too," Gorilla yelled.

"Hold the ones behind you," Post shouted.

"Here." He shoved the sten gun he had taken from her back to Eden. "Just don't let Slug have it yet. You use it." She took the gun. The expression on her face said she would use it if she had to, but that she didn't want to use such a thing if there was any other way out.

A bulky object that had once been a machine of some kind shut off Post's view of the target that Bean-pole had fired at. He slid along the floor, wiggling like a snake through the thick dust, until he could see the opening.

A Martian was sticking his head out of that opening. Post set the sten gun to fire single shots, took aim, gently pulled the trigger. The shot was aimed to hit the wall above the head of the Martian. It hit that spot. The explosion thundered through the room. Fragments of stone, loosened from the fall, tumbled downward. The head of the Martian vanished from the hole.

Post thought: "He sure went out of sight mighty fast." He was a little amused at the speed with which the Martian had disappeared. A little. He had the grim suspicion that any amusement coming up in him right now was going to be short-lived.

He took careful aim at the top of the hole where the Martian had disappeared. It was an arched doorway opening into the room. The sten gun throbbed. Again the explosion of the slug thundered through the air.

"What are you shooting at?" Eden called.

"At a hole where I saw a rat duck out of sight," he answered. He fired again. A shower of stone came down. A cloud of dust blew up. He hadn't stopped the hole but the sight of that rock piled in front of it, and the sight of that dust, ought to make any Martian mighty cautious about sticking his head out of this hole again. Seeing the stone and the dust, a Martian would stop and think that he might get the hell blown out of him if he showed himself there.

"Survival insurance," Post thought. He also knew that it might take more than insurance to guarantee their survival now.

"How are you making out over there?" he shouted to Gorilla.

"Okay so far," Gorilla answered. "But I don't like this a bit. These devils are up to something, Johnny."

"Keep your eyes open," Post shouted.

He got quietly and cautiously to his feet. Slug and Eden were still lying flat. The girl motioned to him and he moved closer. She pointed to her brother. Slug Hardesty seemed to be asleep.

"Let him be," Post said. "He's probably still coming out of the *spico* jag."

"But supposing—I mean, you were shooting at something. What about him if we run into trouble?"

"We'll take care of him, Eden. Don't worry about that."

He nodded to her, moved away. The place of light was quiet. Over at the round opening where they had en-

tered, Gorilla and Bean-pole were visible. They were very much alert and were keeping a close watch. He moved to them.

"Mighty damned quiet, Johnny," Bean-pole said.

"Yeah. Too quiet, I suspect," Post answered.

"But I don't see a thing or hear a thing," Gorilla said.

"We have noticed there is nothing to see or to hear. That's what worries us. When you don't see 'em or hear 'em, these Martians are really dangerous."

"Hey, what's that?" Bean-pole said, pointing high up on the wall.

POST JERKED his eyes upward.

From a spot high up on the wall, a little plume of smoke was shooting outward. It was a pretty sight, a spray of water or of smoke shooting from a hole in the wall. It struck the light flowing downward into the pool and spread out, glowing like a rainbow.

"What is that?" Gorilla whispered.

"I'm damned if I know. Look, there's another one."

Another plume of smoke spray had sprung out from the wall. Striking the light, it too glowed with all the colors of the rainbow.

"Danged pretty, that's for sure," Bean-pole said.

"Yeah, too pretty. As pretty as a desert snake," Post said. He was referring to the rainbow-colored snakes sometimes found on the Martian deserts. Deadly things, more deadly than Earth's cobra, than Earth's bush-master.

Another spray sprang into existence. The whole room was beginning to fill with spray. It was drifting downward, slowly. Something about that slow drift caught Post's attention.

"By God, that's gas!" he gasped.

As he spoke he caught a faint whiff of the rainbow spray floating downward. It did not sting his nostrils, it soothed the smell glands. The odor was pleasant, fragrant. Just getting a whiff of this odor, you wanted more of it.

The odor rang a thousand alarm bells in Post's mind. This was gas!

"Get back in the tunnel!" he yelled at the two men. "I'll get Eden and Slug."

Yelling, he ran to the center of the room. Eden was already on her feet looking for him. She saw him coming, bent down and tried to lift the unconscious form of her brother's body. The effort was too great for her. Rainbow colored gas was drifting around her. Post saw her go down.

Holding his breath, he ran into the gas. He grabbed Slug in one hand, Eden in the other, began to drag them. The gas swirled around him. He held his breath.

He was still holding his breath when he stumbled and went down. Before he became unconscious, he had stopped holding his breath. He had realized that this rainbow colored gas penetrated almost equally quickly through the skin as it did through the lungs.

The rainbow colors in front of his eyes faded out, turned into the blackness. His mind went completely blank.

POST REGAINED consciousness

slowly. Around him were noises, voices shouting in Martian. He listened to the voices without really comprehending them. One voice was raised in anger. Somehow it seemed to be the voice of Sumarez, screaming an order to kill somebody.

Post stiffened. Was he the one who was to be killed. A scream, a struggle, a voice yelling in Martian, the sound of the ending of the struggle,

reassured him on this point. He wasn't the one whom Sumarez had ordered killed.

He opened his eyes and sat up. His head was dizzy, his whole body seemed to be whirling. He was still in the place of light. Eden and Slug Hardesty were there. Off to the right, Martians were lugging in the bodies of Bean-pole and Gorilla. The room seemed to be filled with Martians, all of whom were wearing funny clamps over their nose and strange clothes that completely covered their body. Gas protective devices of some kind, Post decided. His gaze centered on an object lying on the floor beside him. The sten gun.

He reached a quick hand for it, grabbed it, pulled it into his lap.

Off to his left a Martian was dying. The one who had screamed, Post guessed. He gathered, vaguely, that it was Girondel. Girondel was dead, Sumarez had ordered him killed, and Sumarez was bending over Girondel and was watching the Martian die with every evidence of satisfaction and interest. Post wondered why Sumarez had had Girondel killed. For that matter, what was Sumarez doing here?

Post reached into his pocket, searching for a cigarette, found the crumpled package was empty. He had smoked his last one. Sumarez stopped looking at Girondel and turned his attention to Post. The Martian priest grinned.

"Cigarette, Johnny?" He came forward, extending a package of his own. Sumarez liked Earth cigarettes. Post took the white tube from the solid gold case that Sumarez extended, lit it, drew the smoke into his lungs.

"Thanks," he said. He nodded toward the body of Girondel. "Things have been going on around here while

I was off the scene," he said. The words were a question. As he spoke them, he hugged the sten gun.

"That Girondel!" Sumarez spat out the words. "Johnny, I am very sorry. That Girondel, he must have given *spico* to your friend, the one you call Slug. And why? He hoped that you and Slug would kill each other and then he, Girondel, would get the magic detector and find the treasure for himself."

SUMAREZ flung the words out of his mouth as if they were too nauseous to have them inside of him any longer. "That traitor! He would have stolen the treasure not only from you but from me."

"I see," Post said. "Is that why you had him killed?"

"But of a certainty. Killing was too good for him."

"How did you happen to get here so soon?"

"I was searching for Girondel. Did I not tell you to leave him to me, that I would take care of him. I found him just after he and the traitors with him had loosed the mist gas into this room. We caught them with gas in the room and you and your friends knocked senseless by the gas. We captured them and brought them down here. I had Girondel's throat cut. I will have no traitors around me."

Sumarez spoke as if he meant every word he said. His eyes glittered. The parchment skin over the skull that he used for a face darkened with rage. Then, abruptly he changed. "I am sorry, Johnny. Very sorry. Now, as soon as you and your friends get over the effects of the gas, which will be soon, I assure you, you will begin again searching for the treasure. yes?"

Post shook his head, to clear the gas fumes from it. He got slowly to

his feet, walked over to Eden and to Slug. Both were beginning to revive. He examined Bean-pole and Gorilla. They were alive and were beginning to regain consciousness.

Post nodded. "We will certainly begin searching for the treasure, Sumarez."

The face of the Martian broke into a smile.

Post began to revive the others. Eden Hardesty responded readily, Bean-pole and Gorilla returned to consciousness next. Slug Hardesty took longer.

"*Spico*," Sumarez said. "Sometimes it takes a little longer. But he will be all right, soon."

Slug finally awakened and blinked at John Post. "Johnny, where in the hell have you been? What the hell happened? Where am I? Where'd Eden come from? I knew she was coming from Earth but how'd she get here. Johnny, what the hell goes on here?"

Slug Hardesty was not only all right but he had shaken off the effects of the drug. He recognized and knew his friends. But his memory of what he had done while under the influence of the drug was a total blank.

"It's all gone, Johnny," Slug said, after trying vainly to remember. "I don't remember a damned thing that happened, how I got the dose of *spico*, or anything else." His skin wrinkled on his forehead as he tried to think.

"But there does seem to be *one* thing I remember, Johnny."

"What's that?"

"I'm not sure but I seem somehow to remember seeing the treasure we were hunting. Did I see it, Johnny?"

"If you didn't see it, Slug, you soon will. I brought back a new de-

detector. We'll find it with the new detector and you will get to look at it, but quick."

"Please put new magic finder into operation immediately," Sumarez urged.

"As soon as we can," Post answered. Sumarez seemed content with the answer.

To John Post, everything seemed wonderful. He had found Slug, and his pal was back to normal. He had not one but four friends to stand beside him now. Under those circumstances, what could go wrong, what could happen?

Again he thought: "This is too smooth, it's too easy—to be real."

But he couldn't put his finger on any possible source of trouble. All he knew was that somehow, somewhere, the trouble was still there.

Somehow, someday, the situation was more dangerous, more deadly, than it had ever been.

That was what Johnny Post felt, deep in his mind, as he began to work.

CHAPTER VI

"**S**ON-OF-A-GUN!" Post said, staring at the dial of the detector.

Clustered close around him was Slug and Eden Hardesty, Bean-pole and Gorilla, the former very nervous and alert and on guard, and Sumarez and two of his temple adherents.

Slug bent over to examine the dial reading. "This danged thing is crazy too," he blurted out. "It gives exactly the same reading the other one did." Slug's worried face peered up at John Post. "Can it be that the treasure is actually around here somewhere?"

They were still in the middle of

the vast room, near the waterfall of light, near the pool of light.

"I couldn't guess," Post said. "It doesn't seem hardly reasonable that two detectors would make the same mistake."

"It sure doesn't," Slug Hardesty answered. His eyes wandered over to the pool of light. His face twisted, he shook his head and closed his eyes. His muttered words fell away into silence.

"What was that you said, Slug?" Post asked.

"I just said that I thought I remembered seeing the treasure in there," Slug answered, pointing at the pool. "Must have been when I was full of dope." He lifted his head, stared at the pool for a moment, turned his gaze away. "Nothing in there now and that's for certain."

"What is the delay?" Sumarez broke in. "Will not the second magic detector work?"

"It works all right," Post answered. He took the cigarette that Sumarez was offering him, lit it, blew smoke upward. "Damned mystery around here somewhere. I don't get it."

"I will leave the solution to you," Sumarez said, bowing. "I will call again tomorrow, to check your progress." Drawing his robes about him, he spoke to the two Martians with him. They strode across the room of light. Near the exit. Sumarez turned, called out.

"But remember, I am expecting you to find the treasure. Do not fail me."

"We'll do our best," Post answered. He dropped the cigarette and stepped on it, then let his eyes circle the ceiling, seeking out the vents through which the gas had poured. Those vents were out of order now.

Sumarez and his helpers had done the job of destroying the built-in gas blowing equipment, Post had supervised them. Also Sumarez had furnished a supply of gas-proof clothing and inhalators that would stop the gas.

Post decided there was no danger from a gas attack.

IN VIEW of the fact that Sumarez had also posted guards in all the corridors, Post decided there was no danger of an attack from any source.

"So far as I can see, Slug, we're safe," Post said.

Hardesty caught his meaning instantly. "Yeah. But remember, it's when you seem the safest that you are in the most danger."

"I remember," Post answered. He patted the butt of the sten gun. "I'm keeping this baby handy at all times."

"Okay, but what are we going to do now?" Slug Hardesty said.

"We're going to find that treasure," Post answered. "Two detectors won't make the same mistake. Slug, I would bet my last dime we're practically on top of that treasure right now."

"On top of it?" Slug gasped. "Heck, Johnny, are you nuts? This floor is solid rock. We checked that, remember?"

"Well we're as close to it as we would be if we were right on top of it," Post answered. He was a little disgruntled. He walked across the room, trying to think. Slug and Eden continued working with the detector. Bean-pole and Gorilla were on guard. Johnny Post felt lonely in this place of light.

And somehow he felt afraid.

He felt that somebody was trying to trick him, to outwit him, to take advantage of him, to play a dirty trick on him. Who? He didn't know

who was about to do it. But somebody was. He was sure of that.

Like bubbles of gas rising in a glass of wine, fear was rising in him. He felt sweat and irritable and angry. Why the hell had Slug asked him if he was nuts? Slug was the one who had been nuts.

And Eden. How did he know she was all right? She had tried to kill him once, hadn't she? She had hired two thugs to jump him in the streets of Trego, hadn't she? Once they had found the treasure, she might try to kill him again? How did he know she wouldn't?

Post wiped sweat from his face. "What the hell's wrong with you, Johnny? Eden's all right." He told himself over and over again that she was all right, "You fool, you love that girl, and you know it. She's got to be all right."

The sweat came out of him in patches now. He could feel his clothes getting damp and sticky. The fear was growing stronger. Across the big room, he heard Eden laugh at something her brother had said. Her laugh was happy and pleasant but just the sound of it set Johnny Post's nerves to jumping.

"You love that girl, Johnny. You know it."

"But what if she is tricking you? What if Slug is tricking you? What if—" The movement of his fingers were tightening on the butt of the sten gun.

As if it had life of its own, one finger was moving toward the trigger.

At the sight, sweat burst out all over Johnny Post.

Something was happening to him, he knew it was happening. What was it? That, he did not know. But he had the dazed impression that he was going crazy. His mouth was full of

moisture, evidence that his salivary glands were working full blast, his stomach felt as heavy as a rock. Also—and this scared him worse than anything else—he felt like crying.

Fear and tears and hate. All of these were in him. Such fear as he had never known. Until now, he had never really felt fear in all his life. He had gone across Mars, a swash-buckling adventurer, laughing at fear and laughing at death. Because of that laughter, fear and death had passed him by. But the fear had remained in him, shoved deep down inside his soul. It was coming out now. And he hated it. He hated it, he hated everything. His whole body was trembling.

"Hey, Johnny," Slug called from the pool of light.

POST'S finger was very close to the trigger of the gun. Slug was tricking him, Slug was pretending to ask him to come there. When he got there, Slug would shoot him.

In that case... well, he knew what to do with a double-crosser!

"Coming, Slug," he said hoarsely. He would shoot first. His finger near the trigger of the gun, he moved across the cavern.

Eden saw him. "What's wrong with you, Johnny?" she called out.

"Nothing's wrong with me," he answered, in a voice that he did not recognize as his own. He looked at her. "Kill her too!" a voice shrieked down inside of him.

"Kill Slug! Kill Eden. Kill Slug..."

The voice was a raving maniac shouting commands at him. Commands that he had to obey. His finger moved closer to the trigger.

"Shoot her now!" the voice raged at him.

He looked at her. Somehow his gaze wandered past her and into the pool of light.

What he saw there was the most astonishing sight he had ever seen in his life.

The pool of light was filled now almost to the brim with treasure. Blood-red rubies, diamonds, green emeralds, statuettes of precious jade, gold, iron ornaments. All of it was there, just as Slug Hardesty had described it.

In that dazed moment, John Post knew what was happening, knew also what had been done to him. He threw the sten gun toward Slug Hardesty, a surprised look on his face, caught it.

"What the hell, Johnny."

"Get ropes and tie me to that statue yonder!" Post shouted, in a raving voice. "Tie me to it but leave me so I can move my arms."

"But, Johnny, why—" Slug Hardesty's face was a mask of baffled bewilderment.

"Obey me!" Johnny Post shouted. Eden was clutching at him, trying to ask him something. He refused to look at her or to listen. "Do as I say!" he shouted again at Slug. It was Johnny Post talking. Men usually did what Johnny Post asked them to do, whether they understood or not.

Slug Hardesty didn't understand. But he obeyed. Five minutes later, he had Johnny Post roped with his back to the statue. "Now get Gorilla and Bean-pole and get them behind me. Eden too. All of you get behind me where I can't see you under any circumstances. And don't get in my sight for five or six hours. No matter what else you do, *don't let me see you*. I'll kill you, damn it, Slug, I'll kill you if I see you."

Eden, Gorilla, and Bean-pole were

already moving hastily to obey. Slug Hardesty stood in front of Johnny Post, looking at him. "If you say so, Johnny, if you say so." Slug was saying over and over.

"I say so," Post said harshly. "Stick a lighted cigarette between my lips."

Hardesty obeyed.

"Now hand me that sten gun. And the instant you give it to me, get out of my sight around this statue. Move faster than you have ever moved before. I'll kill you, Slug."

"Johnny, I know you will," Slug Hardesty said. Gingerly he extended the sten gun, muzzle first. Post grabbed it, turned it in his hands.

Like a flash of light, Slug Hardesty dived behind the statue, dived to a spot where Johnny Post could not see him. The shot Post blasted at him missed.

SWEAT POURED out of Johnny Post. He sucked the smoke from the cigarette into his lungs, tried to control himself. He said to himself, "You're a fool, Johnny, goddam it, you've put yourself in the one spot where they will be certain to kill you."

As the thought came up in him, he began to tear at the ropes that held him. He fought them as a maniac fights a strait-jacket, his one desperate thought being to get loose from them.

Slug Hardesty had done a good job of knotting those ropes. Johnny Post couldn't get loose from them. Finally he quit trying. He could move his arms and his head but he couldn't get loose. He could see half of the vast room that was called the place of light. He could see anybody coming toward him from one direction. Holding the sten gun in his hands, he forced himself to wait. Someone would come, someone would come.

"Johnny!"

Post sought the source from which he came. There across the vast hall, standing in an arched doorway, was Sumarez.

"What is wrong, Johnny?" Sumarez called.

"Nothing," Post answered. "Nothing is wrong."

"Where are the others?" Sumarez shouted.

"They're back here behind me. They're resting for a little while. I'm standing guard."

"Oh, I see," Sumarez said. He came into the hall, came toward Johnny Post.

Johnny Post waited.

Sumarez took another step toward him, stopped, seemed to sense that something was wrong. Johnny Post lifted the sten gun and fired.

The violent explosion took place against the farther wall.

Sumarez had apparently seen the ropes and had guessed that something was wrong. As Johnny Post lifted the sten gun, Sumarez had ducked. The slug had gone over him and had hit the farther wall. Sumarez, diving along the floor, was unhit. He took refuge behind a chunk of solid stone that had apparently served as an altar in some long-gone time.

As Johnny Post fired the first shot, and missed, a second shot came almost as an echo, from behind him.

"Johnny, they're coming at us from this direction," Slug Hardesty shouted.

"Mow 'em down," Post answered.

Behind him there instantly burst into action what sounded like a full scale battle. The heavy pumping thud of Bean-Pole's heavy pistol was intermixed with the crash of the gun that Gorilla used. Rising over and above both of these weapons was the sound of the sten gun that Eden Hardesty had once handled. From the

way it was being used, Post guessed that Slug was operating it now.

THE ROAR was deafening. Post could not turn his head far enough to see what was happening back there, he had to judge the action from the sounds. The shrill screams of Martians resounded through the place of light, Martians charging with drawn knives, Martians dying under the explosive bullets of the sten gun, Martians being knocked down by the slugs from the heavy pistols, but Martians coming on. Dozens of Martians, maybe hundreds of them.

In such a situation as this, they would charge to the death.

They would keep coming until they were dead. Or until their leader was dead.

And their leader was crouched behind a chunk of solid stone too thick for even a sten gun to blast away. From this safe place, he was screaming commands at them.

"Fight. Kill these Earth aliens. Cut their throats. Kill!"

That was the voice of Sumarez, coming from behind the stone altar.

Again Johnny Post fought the ropes that bound him, again he tried to get loose. He had to get loose, he had to get to Sumarez. Otherwise they all would die here!

He fought the ropes and lost again.

"Slug, you did too good a job!" he wailed. "Come and loose me, come and untie me."

The words were lost in the thundering roar coming from behind him. The trumpet of an elephant would not be heard in this place now.

Jerk as he would at the ropes, Post could not free himself.

A running Martian flashed past him, coming from behind. One who had gotten through the hail of lead coming at him, but who had overshot

his target. He caught a glimpse of Post, turned toward him, flung a knife. Post felt the knife hit him somewhere, felt a flash of pain. He pressed the trigger of the sten gun. The head of the Martian vanished.

Far across the hall, an object moved. Another Martian, coming from that direction.

Post lifted the sten gun again. The weapon burped. Far across the vast hall, the Martian died.

But when he died, another came out of an opening over there, to charge straight across the room. And another and another.

"They're like a river of rats," Post thought. "When you knock one down, three more pop up to take his place."

The sten gun throbbed in his hands. Where the slugs hit, Martians died. But they kept coming.

Johnny Post knew then that there was going to be one end and only one end to this fight. They would go down under the sheer weight of numbers. The magazines of the sten guns would finally empty. Already the thunder of the pistols had gone into silence. There would come a time when the sten guns would stop too.

Then the Martians would simply cut the throats of the Earth aliens.

Then likewise, Sumarez would have the treasure that he sought. Sumarez knew where that treasure was now, knew it as well as Johnny Post knew. And Sumarez would get it.

Post suddenly took his finger off the sten gun.

"Slug!" he shouted. "Slug, I'm out of ammunition."

There was a slight lull in the sound of furious battle. Maybe not enough of a lull for Slug Hardesty to hear him. But enough for somebody else to hear.

A shadow rose from behind the altar and began a mad dash to get out of the room.

Sumarez, tricked into revealing himself.

Johnny Post lined up the sights of the gun, gently pressed the trigger.

SUMAREZ seemed to burst like a rubber balloon. He seemed to disintegrate, to explode instantly into tiny bits of stinking flesh. One second Sumarez was visible, a running Martian. The next second not even his legs were left in the same spot.

Silence fell.

A Martian screamed. "Sumarez is dead!"

At the yell, there came another sound, that of running feet. Their leader was dead. The Martians were finished.

"Run, rats, run!" Johnny Post screamed. He fired the sten gun over their heads.

Suddenly the gun quit firing. Empty. Finished.

Johnny Post held his breath and waited.

There was silence in the vast hall.

"Slug?" he called softly. "Slug."

"Right here, Johnny," Hardesty's voice came from behind him.

"You all right?"

"I'm bleeding in a couple of places. We've all got some holes in us. But we'll do. How are you, Johnny?" A note of wary caution crept into the voice of Slug Hardesty as he asked this question.

"All right, I think," Post asked.

"Is the *spico* going out of you?"

"Yeah, most of it has already gone. Come around here, Slug, and let me loose."

"Sure," Slug answered. "But first, throw your gun away."

"I'm all right, Slug, I swear I am. The gun's empty anyhow."

"Sure, I know. But I'm not taking any chances with a man who may still have some *spico* in him. It makes you want to kill your best friend, that

stuff does."

"Yeah, I know." Post carefully slid the gun to the floor, sent it spinning away with a kick from his foot.

Not until then did Slug Hardesty come into sight. The first thing Slug did was to pull the knife from Post's shoulder. The second thing he did was to examine Post very closely. "I think all the *spico* is worn off," Post said.

"I agree," Slug said. "Where'd you get that load anyhow?"

"From that damned cigarette that Sumarez gave me," Post answered. He swore vehemently for a second. "Slug, before God I came awful close to killing you. I didn't want to do it, but it was still a close thing."

"I know you didn't want to. But Sumarez."

"That dog! Sure, Girondel probably slipped the *spico* to you but he was acting on orders from Sumarez. You see, Sumarez wanted the detector, then he wanted all the treasure, all for himself. He figured if he gave *spico* to you, we would probably kill each other. Then he would get the detector and find the treasure with us out of the way."

"But—" Slug Hardesty's face was a puzzled mask. "Now that you mention it Girondel did give me the dose of *spico* I had. But Sumarez had Girondel killed."

"Sure thing. When I turned up here with a new detector and with some friends, he knew he had to get rid of Girondel and he had to do it in such a way that he could convince me Girondel had been the only guilty party in the first place. What better way to convince me that Girondel was guilty than to kill Girondel?"

"I get it now."

"We could take lessons in double-crossing from the Martians any day in the week."

"But the treasure?" Slug Hardesty had already released the ropes. Eden

and Gorilla and Bean-pole, the latter looking much the worse for wear, had gathered around him.

"Sure there is," Post said firmly. "Sumarez knew where it was the second you told in his presence where you had seen it. That's when he decided to get rid of all of us, simply by loading me up with *spico* and letting me try to kill you. That's when he gave me the doped cigarette. Luckily, I only took one drag on it."

"All I said was I thought I had seen the treasure in the pool of light," Slug Hardesty protested.

"Sure. Watch." Picking up a heavy hammer from the equipment they had brought with them, Johnny Post began to tap carefully on the stone floor around the pool of light.

Inside the pool the light beat down, performing its endless dance.

POST FOUND the spot he wanted. Vigorously he attacked the floor. The floor gave way, revealing an opening.

"A control of some kind!" Slug Hardesty said. "But what does it control?"

The control system was simple, just a lever to move. "Watch," Post said. He shoved the lever forward. He got the impression that this motion shifted the arrangement of the mirrors inside the light pool. At any rate, the pool changed in appearance. The light no longer moved in its carefully calculated path. As the light shifted, Eden Hardesty gasped.

In appearance, it seemed as if the pool had suddenly become full to the brim, with all the objects that Slug Hardesty had described as being there. They blazed there, blood-red rubies, diamonds, a great glittering heap of them. Johnny Post reached in, grasped the blood-red ruby in his fingers.

He lifted it out of the pool, firm,

real, beautiful, and worth a fortune.

"But Johnny, Johnny, I saw that when I was full of *spico*. When I tried to pick it up, it wasn't there. Now you can pick it up, now it is there. How can this happen?"

"When the light was flowing into the pool, the ruby actually wasn't there. It was, literally, in another dimension. Or maybe it was out of our Time. Or maybe it was out of both. You couldn't touch it because it wasn't there."

"But I could see it when I had *spico* in me."

"And so could I. It was only when I saw it that I realized I was doped too. *Spico* is a very peculiar drug. It gives you hallucinations. Only sometimes they aren't hallucinations, they are glimpses of vision reaching clear

across space time. Thus, when you were full of *spico*, you could catch vague glimpses of the treasure hidden right out in the open, hidden in a pool of light. Our detectors said it was there, but we couldn't feel it when we reached for it, and we could only see it when we had *spico* in us."

The four men and the one woman gathered around the pool, stared into it. Here was wealth beyond the imagining. They had found the treasure. Post moved closer to Eden Hardesty, put an arm around her. She came closer willingly. There was another kind of treasure on Mars besides this vast store of wealth glittering in the pool. And both of them knew it.

They knew also that they had found it.

THE END

TOO MUCH SECRECY



By WILLIAM KARNEY



IN LIGHT of the disturbing nature of international relations, it is easy to see that secrecy about military—or potential military—projects must be carefully preserved. We simply cannot permit news to leak out which might be of scientific—and consequently—military value to the not-inconsiderable enemy we know exists.

But in spite of this need for maintaining a watch over scientific activity, it can be carried too far. The Atomic Energy Commission has practically classified as secret, everything about atomic physics including the word "atom". Well, it's not quite that bad yet, but even that exaggeration doesn't graphically illustrate the extreme difficulty one has in obtaining anything but the most trivial news of work in atomic physics.

Should you desire to test this personally, just try sometime, to purchase any radioactive material at all, even a spec of uranium or a dash of a thorium salt. Say, for example, you're an interested student planning to build a Wilson Cloud Chamber or a spintharoscope, harmless and familiar instruments known to all physics students the world over. You require a small amount of a material to emit alpha particles which you want to photograph. Can you go out and buy some—any—radioactive? The answer is, "no"! You

cannot! It requires some tricky finagling to obtain even the tiny quantity you want. You have to either find a piece of ore, or you have to come into the possession of an old watch or clock face which contains minute amounts!

Undoubtedly in time, of course, the restrictions will relax somewhat but while they exist they make things rough for the curious—and so pointlessly too!

Educators are blasting away at this head in the sand attitude which seems to have grasped so many adherents, and they are encouraging a revival of public interest in atomic physics. The facts are that lots of people should know what atomic and nuclear physics is about. The time may come when such knowledge will be invaluable. Let us pray that it doesn't—but it may!

The AEC should make every effort to make the elementary knowledge of nuclear physics available to everyone who can read by a national campaign. Some industries have attempted to do this with notable success. Let us hope that this continues. Meanwhile, if you spot any member of the august bodies connected with dissemination of nuclear knowledge, be careful that you don't say "atom" too loudly, or you'll find out!



STEEL-AGE ROCKHOUNDS



By SANDY MILLER



IN KEEPING with reporting on the activities of the many amateur scientific hobbyists in which this country is so rich, certainly, the gem-hunters and the lapidarists must not be neglected. This interesting and little-known hobby is often quite lucrative even though rocks are about as common as sand grains.

The "rockhounds" as the amateur geologists and stone-cutters are called, specialize in collecting, cutting and mounting precious and semi-precious stones. People all over the country comb the wooded areas, deserts, dried-up streams, mountains and what have you for specimens of rock and stone. Sometimes they make pretty big strikes, uncovering samples of tourmaline, garnet, diamonds (!) and even unusual "plain, old rocks".

In simple but effective laboratories and shops, the enthusiastic amateurs cut the specimens up with saws, (copper or iron wheels impregnated with industrial diamond dust) and then polish them into beautiful artistic works of craftsmanship.

The lapidarists as the polishers are known are usually less interested than the stone-hunters in uncovering specimens. Their primary concern is working the material.

But the rockhounds themselves are a valuable national asset often uncovering rare and important mineral deposits of value to our economy. Right now the hottest thing is of course, uranium samples. The west and near-west are dotted with week-end searchers, all lugging their little Geiger counters, practically crawling on their bellies at the slightest tick in the earphones.

There is really nothing laughable about this hobbyist enthusiasm. It pays off too well. While most hobbyists become fanatics in the best sense of the word, they are an important aspect of our culture. You can bet your bottom dollar that when the rockets start to fly into space, their crews are certain to contain some rockhounds! Who could resist the possibility of uncovering a Martian para-diamond, or a Lunar "moonstone"!

WHAT'S IN A WORD?



By A. T. KEDZIE



"SYZYGY"—no that isn't a word from some obscure Indian dialect. Nor is it a word restricted to the use of crossword puzzle addicts. It is a perfectly good scientific word, which, in spite of its outlandish spelling simply describes an astronomical relationship. It means that three celestial objects are in a straight line—for example—the moon, the Earth and the Sun—that's all.

It's an excellent word to spring on your friends—they'll think you and Einstein are one and the same.

Science is full of these specialized words which at a first glance knock your eyeballs out. "Why can't they speak English?" is the usual first protest of the beginning student in science. "Why do they have to think up these doozies?" Actually there is a very sound reason for this. Scientists go for definite terms, used accurately and meaning only one thing. In that way alone, can accurate reasoning be done. The reason that so many apparently strange words come up in scientific writing is because scientists draw heavily from Greek and Latin, universal languages. Thus scientists of all nations have a common denominator.

To bear this out all you have to do to examine passage is say, French, German, Italian, Spanish, and English. If the pas-

sages are just literary, you can't get much sense from them save from your native tongue. But if the passages are from scientific writings, very often you can almost read them clearly.

The basis of all science, mathematics, however, prefers to tackle accuracy from a different angle. It generally doesn't coin new words or take them from universal languages. Instead it takes very commonplace words like "group", "ring" etc. and assigns them special, specific meanings. Thus reading mathematics without knowing these special meanings is impossible even though the words themselves are quite simple.

Half of science and knowing science is understanding a vocabulary. Once this fact is appreciated, it is usually quite easy to make progress in the subject.

The article began with the astronomical word "syzygy". This obscurity is characteristic of astronomy and anyone studying it must make a quite strenuous effort to learn a large group of totally unfamiliar terms before reading makes much sense.

Words are a tool, part of the equipment for understanding the surrounding physical world. Without them you can't get very far in anything. Keep your goal, your work and your ambition in "syzygy"—and you'll do all right!

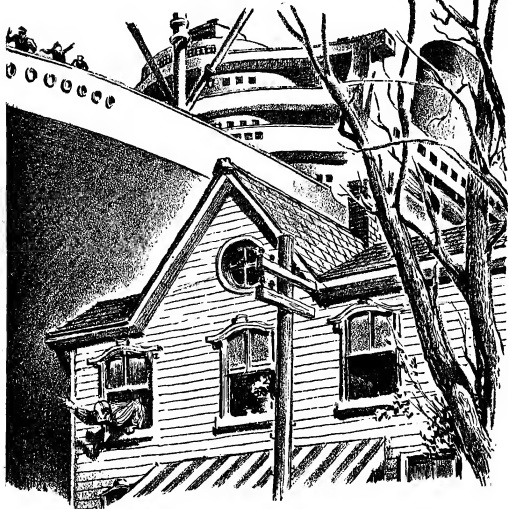
"THE DEVIL, YOU SAY?"

By
Charles Beaumont



It was impossible but true—there in the middle of the street was an ocean liner!

Dick Lewis' daily paper was losing money, so the devil, being a very obliging person, raised hell — and the circulation!



IT WAS two o'clock in the morning when I decided that my attendance at a meeting of The International Newspapermen's Society for the Prevention of Thirst was a matter of moral necessity. This noble Brotherhood, steeped in tradition and by now as immortal as the institution of the public press, has always been a haven, a refuge and an inspiration

to weary souls in the newspaper profession. Its gatherings at Ada's Bar & Grill—Open 24 Hours A Day have made more than a few dismiss their woes for a while.

I had just covered a terrifically drab story which depended nine tenths upon the typewriter for its effect, and both brain and throat had grown quite dry in consequence. The extra block

and a half over to Ada's was a completely natural detour.

As usual at this time of day, the only customers were newspapermen.

Joe Barnes of the Herald was there, also Marv Kepner and Frank Monteverdi of the Express. Warren Jackson, the Globe's drama critic, sat musing over a cigar, and Mack Sargent, who got paid for being the News' sports man, seemed to be fascinated by improvising multiple beer rings on the table cloth.

The only one I was surprised to see was Dick Lewis, a featured columnist for the Express who'd lately hit the syndicates. He usually didn't drop in to Ada's more than two or three times a month, and then he never added much to the conversation.

Not that he wasn't likable. As a matter of fact, Dick always put a certain color into the get-togethers, by reason of being such a clam. It gave him a secretive or "Mystery-Man" appearance, and that's always stimulating to gab-fests which occasionally verge towards the monotonous.

He sat in one of the corner booths, looking as though he didn't give a damn about anything. A little different this time, a little lower at the mouth. Having looked into mirrors many times myself, I'd come to recognize the old half-closed eyelids that didn't result from mere tiredness. Dick sat there considering his half-empty stein and stifling only a small percentage of burps. Clearly he had been there some time and had considered a great many such half-empty steins.

I drew up a chair, tossed off an all-inclusive nod of greeting and listened for a few seconds to Frank's story of how he had scooped everybody in the city on the Lusitania disaster, only to get knocked senseless by an automobile ten seconds before he could get to a phone. The story died in the mid-section, and we all

sat for a half hour or so quaffing cool ones, hiccoughing and apologizing.

One of the wonderful things about beer is that a little bit, sipped with the proper speed, can give one the courage to do and say things one would ordinarily not have the courage to even dream of doing and saying. I had absorbed, *presto*, sufficient of the miracle drug by the time the clock got to three A. M., to do something I guess I'd wanted to do in the back of my mind for a long time. My voice was loud and clear and charged with insinuation. Everybody looked up.

"Dammit, Lewis," I said, pointing directly at him, "in order to be a member in good standing of this Society, you've just got to say something interesting. A guy simply doesn't look as inscrutable as you do without having something on his mind. You've listened to our stories. Now how about one of your own?"

"Yeah," joined Monteverdi, "Ed's right. You might call it your dues."

Jackson looked pleased and put in: "See here, Lewis, you're a newsman aren't you? Surely you have *one* half way diverting story."

"If it's personal," I said, "so much the better. I mean, after all, we're a Brotherhood here."

And that started it. Pretty soon we were all glaring at poor Dick, looking resentful and defiant.

He then surprised us. He threw down the last of his drink, ordered three more, stared us each in the face one by one and said:

"Okay. All right. You're all just drunk enough to listen without calling for the boys in white, though you'll still think I'm the damndest liar in the state. All right, I admit it. I do have something on my mind. Something you won't believe worth beans. And let me tell you something else. I'm quitting this screwball racket, so I don't care what you think."

He drained another stein-full.

"I'm going to tell you why as of tomorrow I start looking for some nice quiet job in a boiler factory. Or maybe as a missionary."

And this is the story Dick Lewis told that night. He was either mighty drunk or crazy as a coot, because you could tell he believed every word he said.

I'm not so sure about any of it, myself. All I know for certain is that he actually did quit the game just as he said he would, and since that night I haven't even heard his name.

WHEN MY father died he left me a hundred and twenty-two dollars, his collection of plastic-coated insects and complete ownership of the Danville Daily Courier. He'd owned and edited the Courier for fifty-five years and although it never made any money for him, he loved it with all his heart. I sometimes used to think that it was the most precious thing in life to him. For whenever there wasn't any news—which was all the time—he'd pour out his inner thoughts, his history, his whole spul into the columns. It was a lot more than just a small town newspaper to Dad: it was his life.

I cut my first teeth on the old hand press and spent most of my time in the office and back room. Pop used to say to me, "You weren't born, lad, you appeared one day out of a bottle of printer's ink." Corny, but I must have believed him, because I grew up loving it all.

What we lived on those days was a mystery to me. Not enough issues of the Courier were sold even to pay for the paper stock. Nobody bought it because there was never anything to read of any interest—aside from Dad's personal column, which was understandably limited in its appeal. For similar reasons, no one ever adver-

tised. He couldn't afford any of the press services or syndicates, and Danville wasn't homebody enough a town to give much of a darn how Mrs. Piddle's milk cows were coming along.

I don't even know how he managed to pay the few hands around the place. But Dad didn't seem to worry, so I never gave the low circulation figures a great deal of thought.

That is, I didn't until it was my turn to take over.

After the first month I began to think about it a lot. I remember sitting in the office alone one night, wondering just how the hell Dad ever did it. And I don't mind saying, I cussed his hide for not ever telling me. He was a queer old duck and maybe this was meant as a test or something.

If so, I had flunked out on the first round.

I sat there staring dumbly at the expense account and wondering, in a half stupid way, how such a pretty color as red ever got mixed up with so black a thing as being broke.

I wondered what earthly good a newspaper was to Danville. It was a town unusual only because of its concentrated monotony: nothing ever happened. Which is news just once, not once a day. Everybody was happy, nobody was starving; everlasting duties were tended to with a complete lack of reluctance. If every place in the world had been like Danville, old Heraclitus wouldn't have been given a second thought. It hadn't had so much as a drunken brawl since 1800.

So I figured it all out that night. I'd take the sheets of paper in front of me and pitch them into the waste basket. Within an hour I'd call up everyone who worked with me, including the delivery boys, and tell them that the Danville Daily Courier had seen its day. Those people with subscriptions, I thought, would have

to try to find me. I had about ten dollars left and owed twenty times that in rent and credit.

I suppose you just don't decide to close up business and actually close it up—right down to firing all the help—in an hour's time. But that's what I was going to do. I didn't take anything into consideration except the fact that I had to go somewhere and get a job quick, or I'd end up being the first person in Danville's history to die of starvation. So I figured to lock up the office, go home and get my things together and leave the next afternoon for some nearby city.

I knew that if I didn't act that fast, if I stayed and tried to sell the office and the house, I'd never get out of Danville. You don't carry out flash decisions if you wait around to weigh their consequences. You've got to act. So that's what I started to do.

But I didn't get far. About the time I had it all nicely resolved and justified, I was scared out of my shoes by a polite sort of cough, right next to me. It was after midnight and subconsciously I realized that this was neither the time nor the place for polite coughs—at least ones I didn't make. Especially since I hadn't heard anyone come in.

An old boy who must have been crowding ninety stood in front of the desk, staring at me. And I stared right back. He was dressed in the sporty style of the eighteen nineties, with whiskers all over his face and a little black derby which canted jauntily over his left eye.

"Mr. Lewis?" he said, hopping on the side of the desk and taking off his white gloves, finger by finger. "Mr. Richard Lewis?"

"Yes, that's right" is what I said.

"The son of Elmer Lewis?"

I nodded, and I'll bet my mouth was wide open. He took out a big cigar and lit it.

"If I may be so rude," I finally managed to get out, "who the hell are you and how did you get in here?"

His eyes twinkled and immediately I was sorry for having been so abrupt. I don't know why, but I added, "After all, y'know, it's pretty late."

The old geezer just sat there smiling and puffing smoke into the air.

"Did you want to see me about something, Mr.—"

"Call me Jones, my boy, call me Jones. Yes, as a matter of fact, I do have some business with you. Y'see, I knew your father quite well once upon a time—might say he and I were very close friends. Business partners too, you might say. Yes. Business partners. Tell me, Richard, did you ever know your father to be unhappy?"

It was an odd conversation, but Mr. Jones was far too friendly and ingratiating to get anything but courtesy out of me. I answered him honestly.

"No, Dad was always about the happiest person I've ever seen. Except when Mother died, of course."

Jones shifted and waved his cane in the air.

"Of course, of course. But aside from that. Did he have any grievances about life, any particular concern over the fact that his newspaper was never very, shall we say, successful? In a word, Richard, was your father content to the day he died?"

"Yes, I'd say he was. At least I never heard him complain. Dad never wanted anything but a chance to putter around the office, write his column and collect bugs."

At this he whacked the desk and grinned until all I could see was teeth.

"Ah, that's very good, m'boy, very good. Times haven't been like they were in the old days. I'd begun to wonder if I was as good as I made out to be. Why, do you know that Elmer was my first customer since

that time Dan'l Webster made such a fool of me! Oh, that was rich. You've got to hand it to those New Hampshire lawyers, you've just got to hand it to them."

He sat chuckling and puffing out smoke, and, looking squarely at the situation, I began to get a very uncomfortable sensation along the back of my spine.

"Your dad wasn't any slouch, though, let me tell you, Dick. That part of the deal is over. He got what he wanted out of his life on Earth and now he's—what's that wonderful little expression somebody started a few centuries ago?—on yes, he's paying the fiddler. But things were almost as bad then as they are now, I mean as far as signed, paid up contracts go. Oh, I tell you, you humans are getting altogether too shrewd for your own good. What with wars and crime and politicians and the like, I scarcely have anything to do these days. No fun in merely shoveling 'em in."

A long, gassy sigh.

"Yes sir, Elmer was on to me all right. He played his cards mighty clever. Included you, Dick m'boy. So all I have to do is make you happy and, well then, the deal's closed."

By this time I felt pretty much like jumping out the window, but shot nerves or not, I was able to say.

"Look, Grandpa, I don't know what in hell you're talking about. I'm in no mood for this sort of thing and don't particularly care to be. If you were a friend of Pop's I'm glad to see you and all that, but if you came here for hospitality I'm afraid you're out of luck. I'm leaving town tomorrow. If you'd like, I'll walk you to a nice clean hotel."

"Ah," he said, pushing me back into my chair with his cane, "you don't understand. Lad, I've not had much practice lately and may be a

trifle on the rusty side, but you must give me my dues. Let me see—if I remember correctly, the monthly cash stipend was not included and therefore was not passed on to you."

"Look—"

"The hundred and fifty a month your father got, I mean. I see you know nothing of it. Cautious one, Elmer. Take it easy, son, take it easy. Your troubles are over."

This was too much. I got up and almost shouted at him.

"I've got enough troubles already, without a loony old bird like you busting in on me. Do we take you to a hotel, or do you start traveling?"

He just sat there and laughed like a jackass, poking me with his cane and flicking cigar ashes all over the floor.

"Dick m'boy, it's a pity you don't want out of life what your father did. In a way, that would have simplified things. As it is, I'm going to have to get out the old bag of tricks and go to work. Answer one more question and you may go your way."

I said "All right, make it snappy, Pop. I'm getting tired of this game."

"Am I right in assuming that your principal unhappiness lies in the fact that your newspaper is not selling as you would like it to, and that this is due to the categorical fact that nothing newsworthy ever takes place in this town?"

"Yeah, that's right on the button. Now—"

"Very well, Dick. That's what I wanted to know. I advise you to go home now and get a good night's sleep."

"Exactly what I plan to do. It's been charming, Mr. Jones. I don't mind saying I think you're a nosy galoot with squirrels in the head. Anyway, do you want to go to a hotel?"

He jumped down off the desk and started to walk with me towards the

front door.

"No thank you, Richard lad; I have much work to do. I tell you, stop worrying. Things are going to be rosy for you and, if you watch your step, *you'll* have no fiddler to pay. And now, good night."

Jones then dug me in the ribs with his cane and strode off, whistling "There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight."

He was headed straight for the Lit-the Creek bridge, which gradually opened off into flap pastures and a few farm houses. Nothing lay beyond that except the graveyard.

I supposed he didn't know where he was going, but I was too confused and tired to care much. When I looked again there wasn't hide nor hair of Mr. Jones.

He was promptly forgotten. Almost, anyway. When you're broke and owe everybody in town, you're able to forget just about anything. Except, of course, that you're broke and owe everybody in town.

I locked up the office and started for home. The fire and fury were gone: I couldn't get up the gall to phone everyone and do all the things I'd planned to do.

So, miserable as a wet dog, I trudged a few blocks to the house, smoked a half dozen cigarettes and went to bed, hoping I'd have the guts to get on that train the next day.

I WOKE up early feeling like a fish left out in the sun too long. It was six o'clock and, like always at this time, I wished that I had a wife or a mistress to get me a big breakfast. Instead I hobbled downstairs and knew exactly what Mother Hubbard felt like. I fixed a lousy cup of coffee and sat down to a glorious dish of corn flakes. I knew that train was mighty far away and that in a little while I'd go to the office, reach in

the filler box and help set up another stinking issue of The Daily Courier. Then would come the creditors and the long line of bushwa. Even the corn flakes tasted rancid.

Then I heard a distinct thud against the front door. It struck me as being odd, because there had never before been any thuds at that particular front door, which made precisely that sound.

I opened it, looked around and finally at my feet. There, folded magnificently and encircled with a piece of string, was a newspaper.

Since the Courier was the only paper Danville had ever known, and since I never read the thing anyway, it all looked very peculiar. Besides, none of my delivery boys ever folded in such a neat, professional manner.

There wasn't anybody in sight, but I noticed, before I picked it up, that there was a paper on the doorstep of every house and store around. Then people started coming out and noticing the bundles, so I gathered it up and went back inside. Maybe I scratched my head. I know I felt like it.

There was a little card attached to the string. It read:

COMPLIMENTARY ISSUE

If You Desire To Begin Or Re-begin Your Subscription, Send Checks Or Cash To The Office Of The Danville Daily Courier. Rates Are Listed Conveniently Within.

That was a laugh, but I didn't. Something was screwy somewhere. In the first place, there weren't supposed to be any morning deliveries. I, Ernie Meyer and Fred Scarborough (my staff) started the edition around eight o'clock, and it didn't get delivered until six that night. Also, since no one was in the office after I left and noth-

ing whatsoever had been done on the next day's issue—let alone the fancy printing on that card, which could have been done only on a large press—well, I got an awfully queer feeling in the pit of my stomach.

When I opened up the paper I about yelled out loud. It looked like the biggest, most expensive high-falutin' city paper ever put together. The legend still read Danville Daily Courier, but I'd have felt better if it had said The Tribune.

Immediately upon reading the double-inch headlines, I sat down and started to sweat. There, in black, bold letters were the words:

**MAYOR'S WIFE GIVES
BIRTH TO BABY HIPPOPOT-
AMUS**

And underneath:

At three A.M. this morning, Mayor and Mrs. Fletcher Lindquist were very much startled to find themselves the parents of a healthy, 15 pound baby hippo. Most surprising is the fact that nowhere in the lineage of either the Mayor or his wife is there record of a hippopotamus strain. Mrs. Lindquist's great, grandfather, reports show, was a raving lunatic from the age of twenty-three to the time of his death, fifty years later, but it is biologically unsound to assume that such ancestral proclivities would necessarily introduce into later generations so unusual a result.

Therefore, Danville's enterprising, precedent-setting Mayor Lindquist may be said to have proved his first campaign promise, to wit, "I will make many changes!"

Continued on page 15

I don't have to recount what I did or thought at all this. I merely sat there and numbly turned to page fifteen.

Displaying his usual cool and well-studied philosophy, the Mayor announced that, in view of the fact that the Lindquists' expected baby was to have been called either Edgar Bernhardt or Louisa Ann, and inasmuch as the hippopotamus was male in sex, the name Edgar Bernhardt would be employed as planned.

When queried, the Mayor said simply, "I do not propose that our son be victim to unjudicious slander and stigmatic probings. Edgar will lead a healthy, normal life." He added brusquely: "I have great plans for the boy!"

Both Mrs. Lindquist and the attending physician, Dr. Forrest Peterson, refrained from comment, although Dr. Peterson was observed in a corner from time to time, mumbling and striking his forehead.

I turned back to the front page, feeling not at all well. There, 3 inches by 5 inches, was a photograph of Mrs. Fletcher Lindquist, holding in her arms (honest to God!) a pint-sized hippopotamus.

I flipped feverishly to the second sheet, and saw:

**FARMER BURL ILLING
COMPLAINS OF MYSTERI-
OUS APPEARANCE OF
DRAGONS IN BACK YARD.**

And then I threw the damn paper as far as I could and began pinching myself. It only hurt; I didn't wake up. I closed my eyes and looked again, but there it was, right, where I'd heaved it.

I suppose I should have, but I didn't for a moment get the idea I was nuts. A real live newspaper had been delivered at my door. I owned the only newspaper in town and called it The Danville Daily Courier. This paper was also called The Danville Daily Courier. I hadn't put together an issue since the day before. This one was dated today. The only worthwhile news my paper had ever turned out was a weather report. This one had stuff that would cause the Associated Press to drop its teeth.

Somebody, I concluded, was nuts.

And then I slowly remembered Mr. Jones. That screwy Mr. Jones, that loony old bird-brain.

He'd broken into the office after I'd left and somehow put together this fantastic issue. Where he got the photograph I didn't know, but that didn't bother me. It was the only answer. Sure—who else would have done such a thing? Thought he'd help me by making up a lot of tall tales and peddling them to everyone in town.

I got sore as hell. So this was how he was going to "help" me! If he'd been there at the moment I would have broken every bone in his scrawny old body. My God, I thought, how'll I get out of this. What would I say when the Mayor and Illing and Lord knows how many others got wind of it?

Dark thoughts of me, connected to a long rail, coated from head to toe with a lot of tar and a lot of feathers, floated clearly before my eyes. Or me at the stake, with hungry flames lapping up... Who could blame them? *Some* big time magazine or tabloid would get a copy—they'd never miss a story like this. And then Danville would be the laughing stock of the nation, maybe the world. At the very best, I'd be sued blue.

I took one last look at that paper

on the floor and lit out for the office. I was going to tear that old jerk limb from limb—I was going to make some *real* news.

HALFWAY there the figure of Fred Scarborough rushed by me a mile a minute. He didn't even turn around. I started to call, but then Ernie Meyer came vaulting down the street. I tried to dodge, but the next thing I knew Ernie and I were sitting on top of each other. In his eyes was an insane look of fear and confusion.

"Ernie," I said, "what the devil's the matter with you? Has this town gone crazy or have I?"

"Don't know about that, Mr. Lewis," he panted, "but I'm headin' for the hills."

He got up and started to take off again. I grabbed him and shook him till his teeth rattled.

"What *is* the matter with you? Where's everybody running? Is there a fire?"

"Look, Mr. Lewis, I worked for your dad. It was a quiet life and I got paid regular. Elmer was a little odd, but that didn't bother me none, because I got paid regular, see. But things is happening at the office now that I don't have to put up with. 'cause, Mr. Lewis, I don't get paid at all. And when an old man dressed like my grandfather starts a lot of brand new presses running all by himself and, on top of that, chases me and Fred out with a pitchfork, well, Mr. Lewis, I'm quittin'. I resign. Goodbye, Mr. Lewis. Things like this just ain't ever happened in Danville before."

Ernie departed in a hurry, and I got madder at Mr. Jones.

When I opened the door to the office, I wished I was either in bed or had a drink. All the old hand-setters and presses were gone. Instead there was a huge, funny looking machine, popping and smoking and

depositing freshly folded newspapers into a big bin. Mr. Jones, with his derby still on his head, sat at my desk pounding furiously at the typewriter and chuckling like a lunatic. He ripped a sheet out and started to insert another, when he saw me.

"Ah, Dick m'boy! How are you this morning? I must say, you don't look very well. Sit down, won't you. I'll be finished in a second."

Back he went to his writing. All I could do was sit down and open and close my mouth.

"Well," he said, taking the sheets and poking them through a little slot in the machine, "Well, there's tomorrow's edition, all—how does it go?—all put to bed. They'll go wild over that. Just think, Reverend Piltzer's daughter was found tonight with a smoking pistol in her hand, still standing over the body of her—"

I woke up.

"Jones!"

"Of course, it's not front page stuff. Makes nice filler for page eight, though."

"Jones!"

"Yes, m'boy?"

"I'm going to kill you. So help me, I'm going to murder you right now! Do you realize what you've done? Oh Lord, don't you know that half the people in Danville are going to shoot me, burn me, sue me and ride me out on a rail? Don't you—but they won't. No sir, I'll tell them everything. And you're going to stick right here to back me up. Of all the—"

"Why, what's the matter, Dick? Aren't you happy? Look at all the news your paper is getting."

"Hap—Happy? You completely ruin me and ask if I'm happy! Go bar the door, Jones; they'll be here any second."

He looked hurt and scratched the end of his nose with his cane.

"I dont quite understand, Rich-

ard. *Who* will be here? Out of town reporters?"

I nodded weakly, too sick to talk.

"Oh no, they won't arrive until tomorrow. You see, they're just getting this morning's issue. Why are you so distraught? Ah, I know what will cheer you up. Take a look at the mail box."

I don't know why, but that's what I did. I knew the mail wasn't supposed to arrive until later, and vaguely I wanted to ask what had happened to all the old equipment. But I just went over and looked at the mail box, like Mr. Jones had suggested. I opened the first letter. Three dollars dropped out. Letter number two, another three bucks. Automatically I opened letter after letter, until the floor was covered with currency. Then I imagine I looked up piteously at Mr. J.

"Subscriptions, m'boy, subscriptions. I hurried the delivery a bit, so you'd be pleased. But that's just a start. Wait'll tomorrow, Dick, This office will be knee-deep in money!"

At this point I finally did begin to think I was crazy.

"What is all this about, Jones? *Please* tell me, or call the little white wagon. Am I going soggy in the brain?"

"Come, come! Not a bit of it! I've merely fulfilled my promise. Last night you told me that you were unhappy because the Courier wasn't selling. Now, as you can see, it *is* selling. And not only to Danville. No sir, the whole world will want subscriptions to your paper, Richard, before I'm through."

"But you don't understand, Jones. You just can't make up a lot of news and expect to get by with it. It's been tried a hundred different times. People are going to catch on. And you and me, we're going to be jailed sure as the devil. Do you see now what you've done?"

He looked at me quizzically and burst out laughing.

"Why, Dick, you *don't* understand yet, do you! Come now, surely you're not such a dunce. Tell me, exactly what do you think?"

"Merely that an old man stepped into my life last night and that my life has been a nightmare ever since."

"But beyond that. Who am I and why am I here?"

"Oh, I don't know, Mr. Jones. You're probably just a friend of Dad's and thought you could help me out by this crazy scheme. I can't even get angry with you anymore. Things were going to hell without you—maybe I can get a job on the prison newspaper."

"Just a queer old friend of Elmer's, eh? And you think I did no more than 'make up' those headlines. You don't wonder about this press—" he waved his cane toward the large machine which had supplanted the roll-your-own—"or how the papers got delivered or why they look so professional? Is that press your imagination?"

I looked over at the machine. It was like nothing I'd ever seen before. Certainly it was not an ordinary press. But it was real enough. Actual papers were popping out of it at the rate of two or three a second. And then I thought of that photograph.

"My God, Jones, do you mean to tell me that you're—"

"Precisely, my lad, precisely. A bit rusty, as I said, but with many a unique kick left."

He kicked his heels together and smiled broadly.

"Now, you can be of no help here whatever. So, since you look a bit peaked around the face, it is my suggestion that you go home and rest for a few days."

"That news...those things in the paper, you mean they were—"

"Absolutely factual. Everything that

is printed in The Danville Daily Courier" he said gaily "is the, er, the gospel truth. Go home, Dick: I'll attend to the reporters and editors and the like. When you're feeling better, come back and we'll work together. Perhaps you'll have a few ideas."

He put another sheet in the typewriter, rested his bushy chin on the head of the cane for a moment, twinkled his eyes and then began typing like mad.

I staggered out of the office and headed straight for Barney's Grill. All it had was beer, but that would have to do. I had to get drunk: I knew that.

When I got to Barney's, the place was crowded. I ordered a beer and then almost dropped it when the waiter said to me:

"You certainly were right on the ball, Mr. Lewis, you and your paper. Who'd a'ever thought the Mayor's wife would have a hippopotamus? Yes sir, right on the ball. I sent in my subscription an hour ago!"

Then Mrs. Olaf Jaspers, a quiet old lady who always had her coffee and doughnut at Barney's before going to work at the hospital said:

"Oh, it was certainly a sight to see. Miz Lindquist is just as proud. Fancy, a hippopotamus!"

I quickly gulped the beer.

"You mean you actually saw it, Mrs. Jaspers?"

"Oh my yes," she answered. "I was there all the time. We can't any of us figure it out, but it was the cutest thing you ever did see. Who was that old fellow that took the picture, Richard? A new man?"

Everyone began talking to me then, and my head swam around and around.

"Mighty quick of you, Lewis! You've got my subscription for two years!"

"Poor Burl never did catch those

pesky dragons. Ate up every one of his turnips, too."

"You're a real editor, Mr. Lewis. We'll all going to take the Courier from now on. Imagine; all these funny things happen and you're right there to get all the news!"

I bought a case of beer, excused myself, went home and got blind drunk.

IT WAS NICE to wake up the next morning, because, even though my head split I felt sure this was every bit a dream. The hope sank fast when I saw all the beer bottles lying on the floor. With an empty feeling down below, I crawled to the front door and opened it.

No dream.

The paper lay there, folded beautifully. I saw people running down the streets, lickity split, toward Main Street.

Thinking was an impossibility. I made for the boy's room, changed clothes, fixed some breakfast and only then had the courage to unfold the issue. The headlines cried: EXTRA!! Underneath, almost as large:

S. S. QUEEN MARY DISCOVERED ON MAIN STREET

An unusual discovery today made Danville, U. S. A., a center of world-wide attention. The renowned steam ship, the S. S. Queen Mary, thought previously to be headed for Italy enroute from Southampton, appeared suddenly in the middle of Main Street in Danville, between Geary and Orchard Ave.

Imbedded deep in the cement so that it remains upright, the monstrous vessel is proving a dangerous traffic hazard, causing many motorists to go an entire mile out

of their way.

Citizens of Danville view the phenomenon with jaundiced eyes, generally considering it a great nuisance.

Empty whiskey bottles were found strewn about the various decks, and all of the crew and passengers remain under the influence of heavy intoxication.

In the words of the Captain, J. E. Cromerlin:

"I din' have a thing to do with it. It wash that damned navigator, all his fault."

Officials of the steam ship line are coming from London and New York to investigate the situation.

Continued on page 20

That's what it said, and, so help me, there was another photograph, big and clear as life.

I ran outside, and headed for Main Street. But the minute I turned the corner, I saw it.

There, exactly as the paper had said, was the Queen Mary, as quiescent and natural as though she'd been in dock. People were gathered all around the giant ship, jabbering and yelling.

In a dazed sort of way, I got interested and joined them.

Lydia Murphy, a school teacher, was describing the nautical terms to her class, a gang of kids who seemed happy to get out of school.

Arley Taylor, a fellow who used to play checkers with Dad, walked over to me.

"Now, ain't that something, Dick! I ask ya, ain't that something!"

"That, Arley," I agreed, "is something."

I saw Mr. Jones standing on the corner, swinging his cane and puffing his cigar. I galloped over to him.

"Look, Jones, I believe you. Okay, you're the devil. But you just can't do this. First a hippopotamus, now the world's biggest ocean liner in the middle of the street— You're driving me nuts!"

"Why, hello Dick. Say, you ought to see those subscriptions now! I'd say we have five thousand dollars worth. They're beginning to come in from the cities now. Just you wait, boy, you'll have a newspaper that'll beat 'em all!"

Arguing didn't faze him. I saw then and there that Mr. Jones wouldn't be stopped. So I cussed a few times and started off. Only I was stopped short by an expensive looking blonde, with horn-rimmed glasses and a notebook.

"Mr. Richard Lewis, editor of the Danville Courier?" she said.

"That's me."

"My name is Elissa Traskers. I represent the New York Mirror. May we go somewhere to talk?"

I mumbled "Okay," and took one more look at the ship.

Far up on the deck I could see a guy in a uniform chasing what couldn't have been anything else but a young lady without much clothes on.

When two big rats jumped out of the lowest port hole and scampered down the street, I turned around sharply and almost dragged the blonde the entire way to my house.

Once inside, I closed the door and locked it. My nerves were on the way out.

"Mr. Lewis, why did you do that?" asked the blonde.

"Because I like to lock doors, I *love* to lock doors. They fascinate me."

"I see. Now then, Mr. Lewis, we'd

like a full account, in your own words, of all these strange happenings."

She crossed a tan leg and that didn't help much to calm me down.

"Miss Traskers," I said, "I'll tell you just once, and then I want you to go away. I'm not a well man."

"My father, Elmer Lewis, was a drifter and a floater all his life, until he met the devil. Then he decided what would really make him happy. So he asked the devil to set him up in a small town with a small town newspaper. He asked for a monthly cash stipened. He got all this, so for fifty years he sat around happy as a fool, editing a paper which didn't sell and collecting lousy little bugs—"

The blonde baby looked worried, because I must have sounded somewhat unnatural. But maybe the business with the boat had convinced her that unusual things do, occasionally, happen.

"Mr. Lewis," she said sweetly, "before you go on, may I offer you a drink?"

And she produced from her purse a small, silver flask. It had scotch in it. With the elan of the damned, I got a couple of glasses and divided the contents of the flask into each.

"Thanks."

"Quite all right. Now, enough kidding, Mr. Lewis. I must turn in a report to my paper."

"I'm *not* kidding, honey. For fifty-five years my dad did this, and my mother stuck right by him. The only thing out of the ordinary they ever had was me."

The scotch tasted wonderful. I began to like Miss Traskers a lot.

"All this cost Pop his soul, but he was philosophic and I guess that didn't matter much to him. Anyway, he tricked the devil into including me into the bargain. So after he died and left the paper to me, and I started to

go broke, Mr. Jones appeared and decided to help me out."

"To help you out?"

"Yeah. All this news is his work. Before he's done he'll send the whole world off its rocker, just so I can get subscriptions."

She'd stopped taking it down a long time ago.

"I'd think you were a damned liar, Mr. Lewis—"

"Call me Dick."

"—if I hadn't seen the Queen Mary sitting out there. Frankly, Mr. Lew—Dick, if you're telling the truth, something's got to be done."

"You're darn right it does, Elissa. But *what*? The old hoy is having too much fun now to be stopped. He told me himself that he hasn't had anything to do like this for centuries."

"Besides," she said, "how did I get here so quickly? The ship was discovered only this morning, yet I can't remember—"

"Oh, don't worry about it, kid. From now on *anything* is likely to happen."

Something did. I went over and kissed her, for no apparent reason except that she was a pretty girl and I was feeling rotten. She didn't seem to mind.

Right on cue, the doorbell rang.

"Who is it?" I shouted.

"We're from the Associated Press. We want to see Mr. Richard Lewis," came a couple of voices. I could hear more footsteps coming up the front porch.

"I'm sorry," I called, "he's just come down with Yellow Fever. He can't see anybody."

But it wasn't any use. More and more steps and voices, and I could see the door being pushed inward. I grabbed Elissa's hand and we ran out the back way, ran all the way to the

office.

Strangely, there weren't many people around. We walked in, and there, of course, was Mr. Jones at the typewriter. He looked up, saw Elissa and winked at me.

"Listen to this, boy. BANK PRESIDENT'S WIFE CLAIMS DIVORCE—EXPLAINS CAUGHT HUSBAND TRIFLING WITH THREE MERMAIDS IN BATH-TUB. 'course, it's rather long, but I think we can squeeze it in. Well, well, who have you there?"

I couldn't think of anything else, so I introduced Elissa.

"Ah, from the Mirror! I got you down here this morning, didn't I?"

Elissa looked at me and I could tell she didn't think I had been trying to fool her.

"Have you turned in your report yet, Miss?"

She shook her head.

"Well, do so immediately! Why do you think I took the trouble of sending you in the first place? Never mind, I'll attend to it. Oh, we're terribly busy here. But a shapely lass like you shouldn't have to work for a living, now should she, Dick?"

And with this, Jones nudged Elissa with his cane, in a spot which caused me to say:

"Now see here, Jones—this is going too far! Do that again and I'll punch you in the snoot."

"I must say, Richard, you're just like your father. Don't lose a minute, do you!"

I reached out to grab him, but the second afterwards he was over on the other side of the room.

"Tut tut, m'boy, not a very nice way to treat your benefactor! Look at that basket there."

I looked and so did Elissa. She looked long and hard. The room was full of money and checks, and Mr.

Jones danced over with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

"Bet a couple could take just what's there and live comfortably for a year on it. That is, if they were sure there would be more to come."

He sidled over to Elissa and nudged her again, and I started swinging.

Before I landed on my face, a thought came to me. It was a desperate, long-odds, crazy thought, but it seemed the answer to everything.

"Tell you what, Jones," I said, picking myself up off the floor and placing Elissa behind me, "This is a little silly after all. I think you're right. I think I've acted in a very ungrateful fashion and I want to apologize. The Courier is really selling now, and it appears that it'll make me a lot of money. All thanks to you. I'm really sorry."

He put the chair down and seemed pleased.

"Now then, that's more like it, Dick. And, er, I apologize, young lady. I was only being devilish."

Elissa was a sophisticated girl: she didn't open her mouth.

"I can see that you're busy, Mr. Jones, so if you don't mind, Elissa and I will take a little walk."

I gave him a broad wicked wink, which delighted him.

"That's *fine*, m'boy. I want to get this evening's edition ready. Now let's see, where was I..."

BY THIS time it was getting dark.

Without saying a word, I pushed Elissa into the alley behind the shop. You could hear the press chugging away inside, so I began to talk fast.

"I like you," I said, "and maybe after all this is over, we can get together somewhere. But right now the important thing is to stop that bird."

She looked beautiful there in the

shadows, but I couldn't take the time to tell her so. Vaguely I sensed that I'd somehow fallen in love with this girl whom I'd met that same day. She looked in all ways cooperative.

I did manage to ask: "You got a boyfriend?"

Again she shook that pretty blonde head, so I got right back to the business at hand.

"Jones *has* to be stopped. What he's done so far is fantastic, all right, but comparatively harmless. However, we've got to remember that he's the devil after all, and for sure he's up to something. Things won't stay harmless, you can count on that. Already he's forgotten about the original idea. Look at him in there, having the time of his life. This was all he needed to cut loose. Dad made the mistake of leaving the *idea* of my happiness up to Mr. Jones' imagination."

"All right, Dick, but what do we do?"

"Did you notice that he read aloud what's *going* to happen tonight, Elissa?"

"You mean about the mermaids in the bathtub?"

"Yes. Don't you get it? That hasn't happened yet. He thinks up these crazy ideas, types 'em out, gets 'em all printed and *then* they take place. He goes over, takes a few pictures and in some way gets the papers delivered a few minutes later, complete with the news. Don't ask me why he doesn't just snap his fingers—maybe he enjoys it this way more."

"I suppose that's, uh, sensible. What do you want me to do, Dick?"

"It's asking a lot, I suppose, but we can't let him wreck the whole world. Elissa, do you think you could divert the devil for about a half hour?"

Looking at her, I knew she could.

"I get it now. Okay, if you think it'll work. First, do me a favor?"

"Anything."

"Kiss me again, would you?"

I complied, and let me tell you, there was nothing crazy about that kiss. I was honestly grateful to Mr. Jones for *one* thing at least.

Elissa opened the front door of the office, threw back her hair and crooked a finger at the devil.

"Oh Mr. Jones!"

From the alley I could see him stop typing abruptly. More than abruptly. So would I."

"Why, my dear! Back from your walk so soon? Where is Richard?"

"I don't know—he just walked off and didn't say anything. Now I'm all alone."

The devil's eyes looked like tiny red hot coals, and he bit clean through his cigar.

"Well," he said. "Well, well, well!"

"You wouldn't like to take me out for a few drinks, would you, Mr. Jones?"

The way she moved her hips would have made me bite through my cigar, if I'd had a cigar. She was doing beautifully.

"Well, I had rather planned to—no, it can wait. Certainly, Miss Traskers, I'd be pleased, more than pleased, oh, *very* pleased to accompany you somewhere for a spot. Richard has probably gone home to talk to other reporters."

With this he hopped over the desk and took Elissa's arm.

"Oh, my dear girl, it has been so long, so very long. Voluntarily, I mean."

She smiled at the old goat and in a few moments they were headed straight for Barney's grill. I almost chased them when I heard him say, "And afterwards, perhaps we could take a stroll through the woods, eh?"

As soon as they were out of sight, I ran into the office, took his materi-

al out of the typewriter and inserted a new sheet.

I thought for a few moments, and then hurriedly typed:

DEVIL RETURNS HOME

The Devil, known also as Mr. Jones, cut short his latest visit to Earth because of altercations in Gehenna. Mr. Elmer Lewis, for some years a resident of the lower regions, successfully made his escape and entry into heaven, where he joined his wife, Elizabeth. The devil can do nothing to alter this, but has decided to institute a more rigorous discipline among his subjects still remaining.

And then, on another sheet I wrote:

OFFICE OF DANVILLE DAILY COURIER DISAP- PEARS

The citizens of Danville were somewhat relieved this morning as they noticed the disappearance of the office of the town's only newspaper, the Courier. All the news reported in the pages of this tabloid since April 11, furthermore, was found to be totally false and misrepresentational, except the information printed in this edition. Those who paid for subscriptions have all received their money in full.

Richard Lewis, the editor, is rumored to be in New York, working for one of the large metropolitan newspapers.

The community of Danville continues a normal, happy existence, despite the lack of a news organ.

I walked over to the machine, which still ejected papers, and quickly in-

serted the two sheets into the slot, exactly as I'd observed Jones do.

At which point the universe blew up in my face. The entire office did a jig and then settled gently but firmly, on top of my head.

WHEN THINGS unfuzzed and I could begin to see straight, I found myself sitting at a typewriter in a very large and very strange office.

A fellow in shirt-sleeves and tortoise-shells ambled over and thumped me on the back.

"Great work, Dick," he said. "Great job on that city hall fire. C'mon, break down, ye set it yourself?"

Of course, as was becoming a habit, I stared dumbly.

"Always the dead-pan—wotta joker! So now you're in the syndicates. Some guys are just plain old lucky, I guess. Do I ever happen to be around when things like that bust out? Huh!"

He walked away, and by degrees, very carefully, I learned that I'd just scooped everybody on a big fire that had broken out in the city hall.

I was working for the Mirror, making \$75.00 per week. I'd been with them only a few days, but everyone seemed very chummy.

It had worked. I'd outsmarted the devil! I'd gotten rid of him and the paper and everything. And then I remembered.

I remembered Elissa. So, come quitting time, I asked the first guy I saw:

"Where does Miss Elissa Traskers work, you know?"

The fellow's eyes lit up and he looked melancholy.

"You mean The Blonde Bomber? Whatta gal, whatta gal! Those legs, those—"

"Yeah—where does she work?"

"Second floor. Flunks for David-

son, that lucky—"

I got down to the second floor quick. There she was, as pretty as I remembered her. I walked up and said:

"Hello, honey. It worked!"

"I beg your pardon?"

She didn't have to say any more. I realized with a cold, heartless feeling, what it was I'd forgotten. I'd forgotten Elissa. Didn't even mention her on either of those sheets, didn't even mention her!

"Don't you remember, honey? You were doing me a favor, coaxing the devil to buy you a few drinks..."

It was there in her eyes. She could have been staring at an escaped orang-outang.

"Excuse me," she said, picked up her coat and trotted out of the office. And out of my life.

I tried to get in touch with her any number of times after that, but she didn't know me each time. Finally I saw it was no good. I used to sit by the window and watch her leave the building with some guy or another, sit there and wish I'd just left things like they were while Mr. Jones was having fun.

It wasn't very peaceful, but so what. I ask you, so what?

DICK SAT in his corner, looking serious as a lawyer. We'd all stopped laughing quite a while back, and he was actually so convincing that I piped up:

"Okay, what happened then? That why you want to quit newspaper work—because of her?"

He snickered out the side of his mouth and lit another cigarette.

"Yeah, that's why. Because of her. But that isn't all. You guys remember what happened to the Governor's wife last week?"

We remembered. Governor Parker's spouse had gone berserk and run

down Fifth Avenue without a stitch on.

"You know who covered that story, who was right there again?"

It had been Lewis. That story was what had entrenched him solidly with the biggest syndicate in the country.

"All right. Can any of you add two and two?"

We were all silent.

"What are you talking about?" Jackson asked.

Dick threw down a beer and laughed out loud, though he didn't seem particularly amused.

"I wasn't so smart. I didn't stop

the devil; I just stalled him awhile. He's back, y'understand, he's back! And this time he's going to get mad. That's why I'm quitting the newspapers. I don't know what I'll do, but whatever it is Mr. Jones is going to do his damndest to make me successful."

I was about to start the laughter, when I saw something that cut it off sharp.

I saw a very old gentleman, with derby, spats and cane, leaning against the bar and winking at me.

It didn't take me long to get home.

THE END

KILLER NUMBER THREE

By JOHN WESTON

THERE IS a disease rampant in the world, which most of us have never heard of. It is called *schistoomiasis* and is an infection of the blood stream by—of all things—snails! So fearful is this disease that it is called the world's number three killer, after tuberculosis and malaria! It has been suggested that the nations who are victims of this frightening malady have their economies cut by a third by the killer. So terribly does it enervate individuals!

Naturally the disease prevails where you might expect it to—where sanitation is primitive, Asia, Egypt, sections of South America. There is no cure for it—like malaria—and the measures taken against it must be preventative. They consist primarily of killing the snails, minute growths, with chemicals in the drinking water. Because of primitive sanitation, this is naturally a tough job, and copper sulfate, so far the best reagent, is expensive to the desperately poor who are afflicted and they run into the hundreds of millions.

The disease is one which affects the individual simply by making him too lethargic and exhausted to work. All drive and energy disappears, somewhat like a moderate case of sleeping sickness. The result is tragedy. The health departments of all nations are cooperating to eliminate this parasitic element but it is a long haul. Apparently only by elevating living standards, is much good done.

The disease is of concern to Americans, because Korea is rife with it and already American soldiers have been stricken. While the military insists on rigid sanitary measures, these cannot be maintained often under battle conditions. The result is

that snails manage to get a "foot-hold" in the blood-stream.

Snails, in connection with disease, are not all we've heard from. The ravages of the giant Asian snails imported into the Pacific Islands by Japanese troops during the war as food, have not been eliminated, but instead are increasing in numbers and power. These huge snails which have overrun many Pacific Islands, ruthlessly strip away vegetation and make it near-impossible for the primitive farmers to cope with them.

These are excellent examples of how easily Man cannot upset Nature. Nature's system of checks and balances in ecology, is a delicate mechanism. And while Man and Science are powerful, often they run into and create situations with which they cannot cope. Fortunately, recognition of these effects is being taken, and organized international efforts are being applied to combat the tremendous forces unleashed. In the case of the Japanese snails alone however, an incredible amount of time, money and effort and materials will be required before it can be destroyed.

Incidents like these remind us of the rabbit invasion of Australia or the boll weevil invasion of our own country. It is no wonder that nations make every effort to check the introduction of strange flora and fauna into their countries. The consequences may be disastrous.

We can imagine what the situation will be when interplanetary travel is achieved on a grandiose scale. The gigantic numbers of potential dangers leave one breathless. Every incoming rocket ship will have to be sterilized inside and out for fear some parasitic organism take hold in our atmosphere!



She held the little doll in her hand while the weird shapes danced around her . . .



By Frances M. Deegan

Accidents can happen to anyone. But the strange thing was that when Sybil was around they happened all too frequently!

“WHEN I was a child,” Sybil told me, “I used to put curses on people.”

“You did?” I mumbled, chewing toast.

We were sitting at the breakfast table at the time. I had one eye on the kitchen clock and the other on the headline story about G. F. Grando.

“GRANDO ACCUSED OF BRIBERY,” the headline said blackly.

“I guess I can still do it,” Sybil went on contentedly. “But of course it always costs something. The bigger the curse, the bigger the sacrifice I have to make. That’s why I haven’t done it for a long time. But I was so mad at Mr. Grando, I just did it.”

“Huh?”

“He had no right to cancel our

vacation plans at the last moment.”

“Don’t talk foolishness, baby. This is serious. G. F. has been accused of paying out half a million dollars to a bunch of politicians in order to corner all the highway construction the city is planning. It could ruin him.”

“Then we can take our vacation,” she said. “Don’t forget to bring your Gladstone bag home from the office.”

“Darling, this is the reason why we can’t go to Bermuda. I’m part of the Grando Construction Company.” The clock hand slid past 8:30. I swallowed the rest of my coffee and got up. “I’d like to know how Sam Black engineered this little coup. Why, great Scott! If he can make the charges stand up, we might all go to jail!”

“Oh, no!” Sybil wailed. “Not you!”

I didn't mean to do that!" I dropped the paper and caught her with a mouthful of coffee flavored kisses. She clung tighter and moaned: "Don't go. Never mind the Gladstone. I won't let you go!"

"Don't get so excited. I didn't mean to scare you."

"If I'd known I'd have to sacrifice you, I'd never have done it. Never!"

"Well, shame on you!" I humored her. "If I'd known I was marrying a witch I'd have taken a course in black magic myself. Look how late it is. I've got to get going. Stop it now, I..."

Fifteen minutes later I was on my way. I had forgotten the paper, and also my hat and briefcase. It was too late to go back for them. I was driving too fast, but I have never been a reckless driver. Even in my present state of confusion my reflexes were automatic and correct. That's why I was sure, even at the time, that the collision was not my fault.

This car cut into the boulevard traffic from a side street and rammed me as I applied the brake. Two more cars piled into it, and there I was in the middle of a clambake that might go on all morning.

I was badly shaken, but more or less intact when the other drivers got to me. They all looked ugly, probably because they were as shocked and scared as I was. There were four of them and I finally got them straightened out.

The two middle-aged business men were the two drivers behind me. They were bosses, taking their time getting down to the office.

The other two were the driver and passenger from the car that rammed me. They were fast talkers and looked too sharp to be legitimate. That was the first thing that registered. The second thing was the unnatural solicitude of the hard-eyed passenger. His name was Horn and he seemed much

too concerned about my condition and my belongings. He wanted to put me into a taxi and see me safely home, or to a hospital, or to my place of business. Anywhere—just so I got into a taxi with him, and brought along whatever valuables I had in the car.

I told him I didn't have anything because I forgot everything.

That was when I remembered the estimates in my briefcase. I wondered uneasily how Sam Black could have known or suspected that I would be carrying them this morning. He could do a lot with them if he was behind the bribery charge.

There was nothing wrong with the estimates. They figured the amount of various kinds of material to be used in a certain type of highway construction. The figures were unusual only because of the large amounts involved. But Sam Black could make those figures look bad by showing how certain politicians would profit by the use of the kind of material specified. Sam Black knew as well as G. F. Grando which pies the politicians had their fingers in. But the general public did not know—unless somebody told them. And that seemed to be Sam Black's mission at the moment.

He had been fighting Grando for ten years, ever since they split up over a minor job. That was before my time, and I didn't know all the details; but Sam Black was the contractor, and Grando was bidding for the excavation work. They got into an argument and Grando took the whole job away from Black. He pulled the right strings, and Black didn't. Black had been snipping at Grando ever since; but this highway job was the first big construction in ten years, and it looked like Black was out to wreck Grando on this one.

All this was going through my mind as the hard-eyed Mr. Horn supported me. My legs were rubbery, but I could

have leaned on something else if he had let go his hard grip on my elbow. The traffic squad arrived, but even then I couldn't get rid of him.

"This man is dazed," he told a young cop. "I think I oughta get him to a hospital. Get him checked over. He says he forgot everything."

"I did not!" I said wildly. "I didn't forget anything now. I said I forgot everything this morning!"

"This is still morning," the rosy-cheeked cop said reasonably. "Maybe you better sit down. You ain't been drinkin', have you?"

"I have not!"

Horn let go of my elbow suddenly and I wobbled and stumbled against the cop. When I got myself straightened out, I saw that Horn was examining the inside of my car. I didn't argue about it. I knew he wouldn't find what he was looking for. He didn't. He backed out of the car and eyed me sharply. I ignored him and went on giving the cop the essential data.

Horn insinuated himself again. "I'll take him home," he offered. "He's in no shape to—"

"You'll get the hell away from me," I said feebly, "before I flatten your nose! You wrecked my car on purpose, but that's all the good it did you."

"Never mind now, Mr. Drake," the cop said kindly. "You're comin' out of the shock. Just take it easy."

Just take it easy! I was already an hour late, and that damned briefcase was back at the apartment. If any of Black's hoodlums got there before I did...

I swung away from the cop and staggered out into the traffic with the idea of hopping a cab. The young cop was wonderful. He stopped the traffic and hauled me back.

"Hey, Mack!" he yelled at his partner. "This guy acts like a concussion."

"Somebody else is going to act like

a concussion," I growled, "if you don't quit this fooling around—"

"Better gimme a hand, Mack. He's gettin' violent."

Mack came over and they dragged me up on the curb. A tall, handsome, gray-haired man eyed me impersonally, and asked: "What's your name?"

"None of your—"

"I'm Dr. Ramsey," he cut in smoothly, and fingered my scalp with firm pressure. "Where did you hit your head?"

I didn't answer him. I jerked my head away and looked around for Mr. Horn. All I saw was blank faces of total strangers gaping at me.

"Where's that Horn?" I demanded.

"That's a car going past, Mr. Drake," the young cop informed me. "You're out of the traffic now. They won't hit you."

He held onto me with both hands. He had saved my life. I was his personal responsibility. I think he felt the way a kid feels when he saves a drowning puppy. It made me furious.

"Mister Horn!" I shouted hoarsely. "That's his name."

"Can you tell me your name?" Dr. Ramsey asked coldly.

"My name is Drake," I said savagely, "but I'll be a dead duck if I don't get away from here in about two minutes. Let go, son. I'm saved. But don't expect me to thank you. Let go of me, damn it! My wife is in danger!"

"No she ain't," my lifesaver soothed. "She wasn't in the car, Mr. Drake. Hold onto him, Mack. He's all mixed up. He keeps tryin' to run right out in the traffic. I saved him once."

"Once was enough," I snarled. "Now let go of me. I've got important business—"

"He don't know what he's talkin' about."

"Bring him upstairs to my apartment," Dr. Ramsey ordered. "I can't

do anything for him here."

"Be careful, Mack," my ardent rescuer cautioned. "Don't let him hurt himself fightin' us."

"Wait a minute, bud—I mean, officer. What's your name?"

"It's Burke, Mr. Drake. Joe Burke, that's me. And I'm your friend, see?"

"I know. That's the trouble. I wish you didn't like me so much. Look, Joe. There's nothing wrong with my head, but I am in one hell of a hurry. I've got to get back to my apartment before—well, before something happens. Now if you want to drive me there in a hurry, and see that I get inside all safe and sound, we'll both be satisfied—I hope."

"I can't do that, Mr. Drake. It's against regulations. I can't ride you around town in the squad car with your head all loose like it is. You got to have first aid. All I ask is, you just come upstairs with the doctor and me. And I'll see you're fixed up right. You wanta do that?"

"No! Blast it all, I haven't got time—" I looked at the coldly disapproving doctor. "Have you got a phone?"

"Naturally."

"Okay. I'll use your phone. Hurry up, will you?"

"Now you're talkin'," Joe beamed without loosening his grip. "Okay, Mack. You can stay here. I can handle him alone. He knows me now."

The doctor had a sumptuous duplex which seemed to contain everything but a telephone. The furnishings and fixtures of the high-ceilinged rooms were authentic Medieval castle, even to the stained glass windows and stone flagged floors. The modern comforts were there, but so thoroughly disguised as to be unnoticeable. The long, two-story library had a minstrel gallery at one end, and a balcony around the other three sides. We passed through the library to get to

the doctor's office.

"The phone!" I croaked. "Where's the—"

"Sit there," Dr. Ramsey said tonelessly, and disappeared into a tiled laboratory.

"Look, Joe. I've got to telephone my wife. It's terribly important. There's a—a serious matter coming up any minute, and she can't deal with it alone. She's a helpless little thing, and—"

"Sure, sure. I know how it is. I'll telephone the little wife, Mr. Drake, and tell her to hold everything. Just as soon as the doctor fixes you up."

I muttered disparaging details about conscientious young cops, and started looking for the phone. The massive, carved oak desk was covered with neatly typed pages, and my eye automatically registered a heading: "Psychopathy in Relation to Witchcraft."

"Please sit down, Mr. Drake," Joe urged patiently. "The doctor—"

"He's not going to monkey with me. He's no medic. He's studying witchcraft."

"Aw, now—" Joe protested.

The doctor returned with a fizzing glass which he set down on his desk. He pressed a fat cherub that was climbing up the left hand side, and the phone slid out of its cubicle. I grabbed it and dialled my number. In the sound-proof silence of the room the glass fizzed insolently in one ear while the phone buzzed intermittently in the other. No answer...no answer...no Sibyl!

My mind was shrieking her name, and I was shaking from head to foot. The doctor watched me with cool interest. I dropped the phone and whirled to the door, but Joe was there with brawny arms.

I fought. I think I howled some, too, but I was no match for Joe Burke. He might look like a choir boy, but he acted like a fullback. That was the

first and only time I ever cursed a cop out loud. I was damn near crying when Sibyl walked in.

Joe was holding me down in the chair, and all I could do was gasp as she walked serenely toward me and leaned down to kiss me. Her arms were around my neck and I pressed my face against her breast, moaning with relief.

"You're not hurt, Denny?" she murmured anxiously. "I wanted to stop you, but I didn't want you to be hurt."

"Where—how did you get up here?" I asked suddenly.

She patted the side of my face and turned to the doctor. "Is he hurt, doctor?"

"I haven't been able to examine him yet." The handsome doctor was showing warm interest for the first time. "Are you Mrs. Drake?"

"Of course. Why haven't you examined him?"

"He has been in a state of acute hysteria. He may have a head injury."

"Oh, no! My poor Denny. What have I done to you?"

"Nothing. There's nothing wrong with me now except my briefcase—"

"Oh, doctor! Please take care of him. Shouldn't he be in bed?"

"Probably. If you can quiet him I'd like to have a look at his head."

"Of course. Be quiet now, Denny. We can't go to Bermuda unless your head is all right. Just let the doctor look at it."

"No," I said weakly, trying to pull myself together. "In the first place, this man is a witch doctor. In the second place, we're not going to Bermuda. And in the third place, I've got urgent business to attend to..."

"Oh, doctor! Maybe you can help me!" Sibyl had left me to confer with the attentive doctor.

Nobody was listening to me except officer Burke, who was still regarding me with a proprietary gleam in his

kind blue eyes. He was prepared to go on saving me from myself indefinitely.

"Just sit still, Mr. Drake," he said. "I don't wanta have to fight you again, but we got to take care of you."

"You'll have to excuse my ingratitude, officer," I said stiffly. "I'm not used to having so many people all trying to take care of me at once. Especially when I don't need it. You have no idea how silly it seems. And now, if you'll excuse me—"

"You understand what I'm trying to do, Doctor," Sibyl was saying sweetly. "I haven't used the gift for a long time. I don't think it should be used indiscriminately, but I was so angry with Mr. Grando—"

"Sibyl! Stop it. You'll get us both committed."

"That's very interesting," Doctor Ramsey said pleasantly, ignoring me. "You have always been aware of this ability to affect the lives of others?"

"Since I was a child," Sibyl confided eagerly. "I think the first time I did it was when my nurse was bringing me a cup of orange juice with castor oil in it. I made her drop it. I knew it was a special gift, but I didn't know exactly what it was until I grew up. After that I was more careful. But Mr. Grando—"

"Oh, yes. The crooked contractor. I was reading about that in the morning paper. That is interesting. And you say your husband is involved?"

There was a hopeful note in his voice which infuriated me. I lunged out of the chair and started toward him.

"That'll be enough of that," I said firmly. "You can't call G. F. Grando a crook, or me either." I was glaring at him, and he seemed to be glaring right back at me with a pair of the keenest black eyes I ever saw. Then the lights went out.

When the lights came on again, I was sitting in the chair blinking at

Dr. Ramsey who was making passes at me with a pair of long white hands. My head ached and I felt like a soggy mushroom, all top and no bottom.

"I feel like a mushroom," I said. "Somebody hit me on the head when the lights went out."

"You'll be all right now," Dr. Ramsey said confidently.

I didn't believe him. I felt terrible. "I think I'll lie down," I said, hoping somebody would roll a bed up close so I could get aboard without too much effort.

"You don't want to go to your office?"

"I should say not." I had lost all interest in the office.

"You're not worried about Mr. Grando?"

"Nope. He's a crook. You mind if I lie down?"

"From what you just told me about your business, I'd say it was very urgent. Don't you think you'd better get busy and take care of it?"

"Not now. Please, doctor. Just let me lie down...anywhere. Floor will do."

"I can't have you lying around on the floor," Dr. Ramsey said sternly. "If you must lie down, you'll have to go to bed properly."

"Thanks. That's wonderful."

"Drink this." He handed me a foaming glass that was fizzing deliciously. I drank it and felt pleasantly numb.

Somebody brought a wheelchair and I was conveyed swiftly and noiselessly to a pleasant room. There was a beautiful bed with smooth sheets opened invitingly. I slept. I had a wonderful sleep.

When I opened my eyes drowsily I knew it was late afternoon. It felt like late afternoon. I was glad the day had passed so pleasantly.

Sibyl came in with a tray. She

looked charming and wifely. The tray held burnished silver and white damask and smelled delightful. It smelled like strong rich coffee, and bacon and eggs. I sat up hungrily and watched her pour the steaming black liquid.

There was a young man in a shaggy tweed suit who came in behind Sibyl. A very large young man.

"Hello, Mr. Drake," he said. "You remember me?"

"Oh. Oh, yes. You're Officer Joe Burke. Without your uniform. You get promoted for hitting me on the head?"

"No, I didn't. I didn't hit you on the head. And I didn't get promoted. I changed clothes when I went off duty. I just stopped by to see how you're comin' along."

"I'm coming along fine. Slept like a top." The bacon and eggs were delicious, but I paused long enough to inquire politely: "You have a good day?"

"Well, yes and no. I had to make a full report of your accident. Four times I had to make it."

"Sorry you had so much trouble, Joe. Sit down. You want a cup of coffee?"

"No thanks." Joe sat near the bed and regarded me with troubled blue eyes. Sibyl stroked my head and steadied the tray on my knees.

"I'm fine," I assured them. "This coffee is wonderful."

"Oh, darling," Sibyl cried softly. "I'm so sorry."

I stared at her. "Because the coffee is wonderful?"

"No. Be-because you are."

"You got the right spirit," Joe said solemnly.

Dr. Ramsey came in, looking immaculate and benign. "Is everything all right?" he asked.

"Everything's wonderful," I assured him. "Thank you very much, doctor."

"Not at all. There is a gentleman here to see you."

"If it's G. F. Grando, tell him to go fly a kite. I quit. I quit this morning. Anyway I can't get out of bed."

"It isn't Grando. It's the State's Attorney."

"Well, I can't get out of bed for him either. Tell him to come back some other time."

"I'm afraid I can't do that. His business is rather urgent. It seems that Grando and Sam Black were killed today under peculiar circumstances."

"Serves 'em right," I said coldly. "Couple of highbinders. May I have some more coffee, honey?"

"I think you had better see the State's Attorney," Dr. Ramsey said gently. "Both men were found dead in your apartment."

"They had a lot of nerve!" I sputtered. "Turning my home into a slaughter house. What if my wife had been there? Who found them?"

"The neighbors called the police when they heard the shots. You can understand why the State's Attorney is here in person to talk to you."

"He'll have to talk to me in here then. I can't get out of—"

"I've already explained your condition," Dr. Ramsey said. "He understands that." He walked to the door and said: "Will you come in now, Mr. Grogan. I think we've got him awake for you."

Mr. Grogan was a thin man with a sharp face and dull black eyes. He had a short, fat man with him who was not introduced to me. This man sat down and produced a notebook and selected one of the six fountain pens clipped to his pocket.

Grogan said: "How do you do." And went right into his routine questionnaire with all the fiery emotion of a battered broomstick. Name, address, business, etc. It was tiresome and senseless.

Finally I said: "Ask me something hard. Ask me what they were doing in

my apartment."

"What were G. F. Grando and Sam Black doing in your apartment?"

"They went there to get my briefcase. Now ask me what was in my briefcase."

"What was in your briefcase?"

"Don't tell me you haven't examined it."

"I haven't."

"You mean the police didn't find it?"

"Not to my knowledge. What was in it?"

"Estimates of various types of material to be used in highway construction. Certain special types of material. You know what I mean?"

He didn't answer that, but he knew what I meant. He began to show a little more life. He got tougher. We went around and around, covering everything that had happened up to the time of my collapse. Sibyl and Joe Burke and Doctor Ramsey all got in on it, and proved that I couldn't have gone back to the apartment for the briefcase.

"And after your collapse," Grogan said harshly, "you couldn't move at all?"

"I'm dead from the hips down," I said cheerfully. "As I understand it, there was injury of the brain cells governing the spinal nerves, and resulting in paralysis. I couldn't have gone back for the briefcase. And I couldn't have shot those two marauders. You must know what time they were shot."

"Sometime around noon," Grogan said grudgingly. "Your wife says you were sound asleep at the time. But there was somebody else in the apartment, besides the two dead men. There were two guns found, both .38 caliber. But somebody had fired several shots from a .32. That gun was missing."

"And so was the briefcase," I said. "I know one other guy who was after my briefcase. I think he was hired by

Sam Black to get it. You've got the record, Joe. The guys that smacked me this morning. They were out to get me. When they didn't find the briefcase, they reported to Sam Black, and all went back to my apartment after it. That's the man you want, Grogan. He said his name was Horn. What name did the other fellow give you, Joe—the driver of the car?"

"Hall. Pete Hall," Joe said excitedly. "Horn and Hall. I've got the data. And I remember that Horn was trying to drag you off in a taxi when I came up. Lucky I got there when I did. I knew right away you were knocked out. You didn't even know you were hurt. You kept yelling you had urgent business to tend to."

"Did I?"

"Sure, you were in an awful big hurry. I guess you were in a hurry to quit your job after you read about Grando being a big crook."

"I guess that must have been what it was. It's too bad about that briefcase, Grogan."

"Yes, it is," Grogan said sourly. "But if anybody tries to use that material for blackmail now, he'll be laying himself open to a murder charge. Meanwhile I'll get after those two men, Horn and Hall. You can help me on that, Burke."

"Yes, sir!" Officer Burke said happily. He got up at once, looking large and determined. "Keep your chin up, Mr. Drake," he admonished. "You got the right spirit."

THEY FOUND Horn and Hall, but they didn't find the briefcase. With both Grando and Black dead, the bribery charges collapsed. But I think quite a few people are still looking for that briefcase. I think certain politicians will be uneasy as long as it's missing. But they won't find it.

Sibyl and I stayed on at Dr. Ramsey's castle for two weeks. We gave up

the apartment because of what had happened there. And Sibyl was packing for our trip to Bermuda. She kept coming to the bed with this and that, to ask me if I thought we'd need it. I was reading the paper and not paying much attention when she came and stood by the bed, and said in an odd little girl voice: "Denny, I don't know what to do with this."

I looked up and saw the briefcase. "Where'd that come from?"

"I brought it here, Denny. The—the day you were hurt. But after the State's Attorney was here, I didn't want to say anything about it. I thought—"

"Are the estimates in it?"

"Papers," she said, and pulled them out. "These?"

"Take them in the bathroom and burn them in the washbowl."

We took the briefcase to Bermuda and buried it in the white sand. Sibyl was wearing a two-piece white satin bathing suit. She looked like a bright angel in the sun. She covered the briefcase and patted the sand down tight.

"And now Denis Drake," she said, "you're going to get up and walk."

The sun blinded me for a moment, and she was a mystical, blurred shape standing over me.

"I'm going to walk down to the water and start swimming, and I won't stop until you come after me." She walked away from me with her back straight, and went into the water without looking back.

"Sibyl!" I called. "Come back!—don't torment me!"

She started swimming, a flashing white figure in the blue swell. We had chosen a deserted beach to bury the briefcase. The wheelchair was standing there. It was no help in the water. Black panic swirled around me, darkening the sun, coming down like a cloud to shut out the tiny moving figure in the vast blue water. Fright-

ful things went through my mind with violent speed. She couldn't be trying to kill herself! She had no reason... no reason...

"Sibyl!" I shouted, and the shout lifted me to my feet. I didn't walk, I ran to the water and shoved off, swimming strongly.

I brought her back. I pulled her up on the beach and shook her savagely until we both fell on the sand with our arms around each other.

That's all. I've told it just the way it was. I'm practical and reasonable. Always was. As far as I'm concerned there's a practical and reasonable explanation for the whole crazy business. When Sibyl discovered that I had forgotten my briefcase that morning, she dressed in a hurry and followed me in a cab. When she saw the wrecked car she got out and found out where they had taken me. There was nothing unusual about my injury. That sort of thing happens all the time. Temporary damage to the brain cells affects other part of the body. The only danger is that the victim is apt to get a fixed notion that

the injury is permanent. Sibyl used shock to snap me out of it.

As for her ability to put curses on people, that was a bit of nonsense that she dreamed up. Dr. Ramsey cured her of that, during the time we were staying with him. She told me about it afterwards. He explained that she did have a gift, but there was no witchcraft about it. It was a gift of clairvoyance which enabled her to know in advance what was going to happen whenever she was vitally concerned. This was particularly strong in the case of accidents and misfortune. And the impression was so vivid that it affected her thinking, and led her to believe that she was responsible for the thing that happened.

You see? All perfectly reasonable, if you look at it sensibly. But of course, I'm taking no chances. I'm going to be very careful of my associates from now on. I'm going to be sure that Sibyl approves of them. Not that I'm afraid of anything, you understand. I just don't want any friction. Or accidents...

THE END

SPIRAL MILKY WAY?



By CHARLES RECOUR



MUCH INTEREST has been aroused by the speculation that the Galaxy in which we dwell, may be Spiral Galaxy. A number of observational facts indicate this, though the confirmation is difficult to obtain because we are in the very galaxy we are trying to study. It's like trying to tell what kind of a car you're riding in without being able to see the outside.

The spiral galaxy is one of the most familiar forms in the universe. The naked eye doesn't show these island universes, but even telescopes of moderate ability do. From a knowledge of the frequency and numbers of the galaxies of the spiral type, we are inclined to think these sort of a standard form. When then should our own "lenticular" universe be different? Apparently there is no reason, and by an exam-

ination of the varying density of stars that we are able to section it seems that our own Milky Way exhibits this same character.

The importance of this hypothesis lies in the fact that the structure of a universe gives an excellent clue to its origin. There is reason to believe that the spiral nature of a universe is a clue to the way in which it was formed.

At present astronomers are trying to determine just how our galaxy is rotating with respect to others. Knowledge of this will enable us to deduce, along with knowledge of the direction in which our galaxy is headed, just how old our system is. There may be no immediate Earth-shaking scientific consequences, but it is certainly satisfying to know how your system came into being!

ASK ME NO

By Mack Reynolds



The gun blasted, and behind the bound figure in the chair the wall disintegrated . . .

QUESTIONS!

They knew that the Martians were in the drug business on Earth. They wanted to know why — and strangely, so did the Martians!



*And oft though wine has played
the infidel,
And robbed me of my robes of
honor, well,
I wonder often what the vintners
buy
One half so precious as the stuff
they sell.*

—Omar

THEY'D chosen me to interrogate our Martian prisoner, not because I'd had any more experience than the others, but largely due to my research in 20th Century novels and films. Then too, I suppose, my scorn of cosmetic surgery might have had something to do with it. I've never even had my beard permanently removed and for this occasion I had let it grow several days so that my face would look as brutal as possible.

I'd rehearsed for hours, running over again motion picture films of the mid-20th Century. I had my props at hand and thought I was as ready as I'd ever be.

After the kidnapping—the first such crime in more than two and a half centuries—they'd brought him immediately to the small suburban underground house which we'd used for our base for the past six months. It was a comfortable enough establishment, typical of the neighborhood, but we'd altered one room in preparation for him; barren except for a small table and a battered chair to which he was tied, it looked as much like the den of a gang of thieves as we could make it.

He was allowed to remain there, bound and gagged, and—we were

hoping—terrified, for several hours. Then I entered.

I had a cigarette dangling from the side of my mouth. I let the smoke spiral upward from it, and refrained from puffing. For one thing, that's the way they did in the films; for another, I was afraid it would make me deathly ill. Tobacco is used only in some of the most isolated spots of Terra, and only by those who are as yet unacquainted with *dwarf*, or Martian Poppy as it is usually called.

I sat on the edge of the table and looked at him, cold faced, emotionless; trying to appear vicious. Finally, I took the cigarette from my lips and ground out the burning tip in the palm of my left hand. Doctor Gardnr, one of our group, had prepared the palm earlier with resin, but, of course, the Martian didn't know that. His antenna twitched as he saw me extinguish the stub on what seemed bare flesh.

Still not taking my eyes from his face, I reached my hand into my jacket under my left arm and brought forth the revolver. I'd been practicing handling the horrible thing for several days, but I was still clumsy at it; however, it was unlikely that he'd know the difference.

I reached over and pulled the gag from his tiny mouth and stuck the muzzle of the revolver to within inches of his face.

"Know what this is?" I growled.

He shook his head in negation.

THAT WAS something to be thankful for. He'd been kidnapped at random; at least we'd picked one that knew Amer-English even well enough to be familiar with our gestures.

"No," he said, his tone wistful, as is always the case with Martians; invariably they look and speak as though they'd just received news of their mother's death.

"It's a gat," I told him, trying to work an element of the sinister into my voice, "a rod."

His antenna flinched, and his melancholy eyes went a deeper green. "You mean it's a weapon?" he lisped unbelievably.

I waved the muzzle near his face. "That's right, pal," I said from the side of my mouth. "Pretty hard to come by now, but just as lethal as ever." I gestured with it. "Now this just happens to be a .358 Magnum; one of the deadliest hand-guns the ancients made; great favorite with the boys back in the old days. I picked it up in a museum. Watch!"

I leveled it at the far wall, turning my back to him so he wouldn't be able to see me close my eyes, and pulled the trigger.

In reconstructing the ancient weapon from diagrams in publications of the time, we'd had to make various improvisations. For one thing, we hadn't been able to decide whether or not the pellets, or bullets, the things threw exploded upon contact. We decided they did but that it would be a mistake for us, perhaps an injurious one, to try and copy that feature. Instead, Franz Mect, one of the engineers of our group, volunteered to conceal a small explosive in the wall of the chamber in which we were going to question our prisoner. In this manner, we planned to simulate the effect of the gun, rather than go through the actual experience.

At any rate, the results were gratifying. The revolver jumped in my hand and made a slight noise; Franz, stationed at a peephole, ignited the explosive in the wall; the wall exploded and when the dust cleared there was a hole large enough for a man to walk through.

I turned back to the Martian and nonchalantly returned the revolver to the holster under my arm.

"We mean business, pal," I grunted at him. "Now then, are you going to talk, or do I have to go to work on you?"

"I'm thor I don't know what you mean," he lisped, obviously shaken, but still defiant.

I laughed hoarsely, sneeringly. "Why do you Martians sell *dwarf* here on Terra?"

A deeper fear showed in the wilting of his antenna, and his eyes went green as emerald.

THE VARIOUS Terran governments had already established two or three Space Stations, revolving around our planet at varying distances and had sent several expeditions to Luna at the time of the arrival of the first Martian spacecraft. Had the Martians waited even another two or three years, we would have visited them first, although it's unlikely it would have made much difference.

From the first, intercourse between the two planets was on the friendliest plane. The Martians, somewhat smaller and more delicate than the Terrans in appearance, were approximately equal intellectually; the slightly higher I.Q. enjoyed by the humans being offset by the antiquity of the Martian civilization.

They had been receiving our radio emanations for generations and had painstakingly managed to decipher our means of communication to the point that even their first explorers to land among us were able to speak not one, but several of our languages. That, of course, was before Amer-English had become universal on Terra.

During the first decades of our relationship with the sad eyed, lisping life forms from Mars, we earthlings had profited greatly as a result of their suggestions and assistance in various fields. World government was

established, for one thing, and a stable socio-economic system. Various fundamental diseases were wiped out and earth entered a new era of health and prosperity.

Trade between the two planets consisted principally in exchange of techniques, although there was considerable interest in each other's art forms. In fact, the dream art of Mars became exceedingly popular overnight on Terra, and the Martians became quite intrigued with Terran music, especially the more primitive types such as Calypso.

Conflict between the Martians and ourselves was unthought of, especially after the first half century of relations with them. War on Mars itself had been eliminated so many milleniums before that even the historic accounts of their conflicts were lost in antiquity, confused with legend; and with the establishment of the World Government, it became impossible on our own planet. Weapons soon became as illegal and unknown on Terra as they had been for centuries on Mars.

Seemingly, we were set for an indefinite period of peace and friendly relations with the only other planet in the Solar System which supported intelligent life.

Perhaps that last is misleading. According to the Martians, there was life on Venus, but it was hostile, backward, and living conditions on the planet so impractical for either Terran or Martian, that after one or two half-hearted attempts, we gave up our efforts to communicate with them. Perhaps, we reasoned, in a few thousand years they would have developed on their own to the point where they could take their place with Mars and Earth in a three way relationship as satisfactory as that between the two of us.

It is unknown, exactly, when the Terran use of *dwarr* first began. Introduced on a small scale in the beginning, its use grew only infinitesimally. It was decades before its spread had reached the point where it was investigated—discreetly, of course, since its source was Mars and we had no wish to cast aspersions on our friendly neighbors in the sky.

IT WASN'T a narcotic; not in the ordinary sense of the word. The use of narcotics on Terra had disappeared except for medicinal reasons, long years before. But *dwarr* did have a good many of the effects of the opium poppy of long ago.

It wasn't habit forming, there was no known case of a person becoming addicted, but it did lead to a dream world that was utterly desirable. In the early stages of its use—it was usually taken in beverage form—it wasn't much more effective than tea, or coffee, those mild narcotics of yesteryear. It gave a slight *lift*. As the user continued to indulge, however, the effect became stronger and after a period of years the use of *dwarr* led to a dream world beyond anything accomplished with opium or even hashish.

Dwarr had the ability to select each person's most inner desires and give him realization of them. Were you a would-be poet, your *dwarr* inspired dreams had you writing sonnets that put Shakespeare and Spencer to shame; were you a scientist, *dwarr* had you conquering the problems of the universe. Were you a lover, *dwarr* gave you hours far more beautiful than Mohammed had ever conceived in his paradise for the faithful.

There seemed to be no physical or mental after effects to condemn the Martian Poppy. A *dwarr* drinker could be taken from its use for any period and never feel the worse for

it, except, of course, a desire to enjoy its pleasures again as soon as it was possible.

The most thorough investigation showed no injurious effects as a result of the beverage's use, and the government dropped its probe of what some had feared a dangerous narcotic.

Fifty years later, half the population of Terra used *dwarr* and another investigation into its nature took place. There were still no signs that either mental or physical damage was done by its continual use, and eventually the second government investigation was dropped as had been the first.

Our friendly relations with Mars continued; we exchanged scientific developments, we traded our art objects. And they sent us *dwarr* in return for titanium which was evidently almost unknown on their planet. Several attempts were made to grow the Martian Poppy in Terran soil, but they were unsuccessful; its use continued to depend upon our Martian friends.

The final government investigation into the use of *dwarr* was made approximately one hundred years ago, and was less successful even than previously. Perhaps this was due to the fact that for all practical purposes *all* Terra was now using the beverage. Even those who investigated its use were enamored of it; and the bare news that such an investigation was taking place had been enough to bring waves of protest from all earth. The probe was dropped.

Scientific development lagged, art came to a standstill, ambition was a thing long dead; but the use of *dwarr* continued, increased, expanded.

We were the only ones, our little secret society consisting of perhaps twenty persons in all—what in yesteryear might have been called an un-

derground—who fought the Martian Poppy. Convinced that some sinister purpose was behind its distribution to earthlings, we conducted our study of *dwarf* quietly, determinedly. This kidnapping and interrogation of the Martian trader was the culmination, thus far, of our efforts. From him we must wrest crucial answers, if the fight was to continue.

"I'M THOR I don't know what you mean," the little Martian lisped.

I rasped out a laugh, then sneered down at him. I took from a pocket a small clasp knife, another relic from the museums, pressed a button on its side and let the blade flick out only a fraction of an inch from his throat.

"Maybe you need some persuasion," I growled, wondering if I sounded authentic, and wondering how Doctr Gardnr and the rest who I knew were peering through peek-holes in the door and walls, were taking it.

The very thought of imposing physical violence upon another, turned my stomach slightly, but I must never let him know this. Everything depended upon his believing his life was in danger.

I let the light flicker on the knife blade. "You're going to talk, Martian," I told him coldly, "or you're going to go through something you never knew still took place here on Terra; something our government's kept secret from you." I laughed bitterly. "Probably ashamed of it."

His antenna twitched and his eyes went from aquamarine to emerald in apprehension. "You . . . m e a n . . . torture?" he lisped, shocked.

I whetted the blade on the palm of my hand. "Torture is right, pal." I put the point to the base of his thin neck. "Now talk, or else," I grated.

I have never seen such living fear

as that reflected in every facial expression, in every twitching movement of the thin framed, wistful appearing little Martian. I was afraid for a moment that his mind would crack under the pressure, and told myself I should have known better than to have gone so far.

There has been no war, no crime, no physical violence on earth for at least two centuries. From earliest childhood, in our schools, in our homes, our books, our means of entertainment, we are taught to abhor violence. But while it has been so on Terra for two centuries, it has been so on Mars for at least twenty.

It was the very shock effect, that we were depending upon.

His sad face was rigid with alarm, and his voice tight—it undoubtedly would have been shrill were Martians capable of inflection. I let the blade touch his throat, gently.

"Yeth, Yeth!" he lisped, "I'll tell you whatever you wish to know."

Victory!

I leaned back and considered him, as though I was sorry he hadn't given me the opportunity to work on him with the knife. "Okay, pal," I growled, "Wait'll I call in some of the other boys."

I went to the door and stuck my head out into the hallway. Doctr Gardnr was there and Franz Mect and two or three of the others. The rest were about the house or scattered around the neighborhood on watch to warn us in case of emergency. The penalty, if our crime was detected, would be sur-amnesia, the equivalent of death, although, of course, our bodies would continue to live supplied with a new personality to replace that which society had rejected as injurious to the majority.

The others came in and stared as coldly as possible down on the little

Martian trader, seated there in his bonds. They attempted to carry on the atmosphere I'd created, but modern cosmetic surgery makes it difficult for a person who has chosen to be made godlike in appearance to look sinister.

I jerked my thumb at the Martian. "He'll talk," I rasped, returning the knife to my pocket. I brought out the revolver again and trained it on his chest.

Doctr Garrn began softly, "In the past, here on Terra, we put our souls, our desires, into many things; into ambition, into investigation of the mysteries of science, into the arts, into love, into good food and good drink, and into a myriad of other things that made life worth the living.

"But what do we have *now*?—Why should we value the work of a master chef when we can eat garbage and afterward take *dwarr* and feast on the food of the gods? Why should we love a beautiful woman when *dwarr* will give us a beauty a thousand times greater. Why should we attempt any ambition, when your Martian Poppy concedes us any desire, any pleasure?"

THE MARTIAN sat, a picture of pathos, his eyes still shining green with fear and his eyes going from the doctor to my revolver and back again.

"Why do you sell *dwarr* to Terrans?" the doctor snapped.

The Martian lisped in fright, "For the titanium we get in exchange for it."

I sneered.

The doctor said softly, "You underestimate us, my friend. We happen to have spent years in this investigation and know titanium is used practically not at all in your industries. You have no need for it, at least not at all in the quantities we have to

send you in order to supply Terra with *dwarr*."

I tightened my finger on the trigger and his antenna flinched.

The doctor held up a hand as though to restrain me momentarily. "We also happen to know," he said, "that the use of *dwarr* is unknown on Mars. You know its effect, you know what it has done to us; and *you don't use it yourselves*. Why, *why, why!* do you Martians sell *dwarr* to earth. Are you attempting to weaken us so that you may take over our planet and possibly colonize it with your own race?"

There was a touch of scorn in the melancholy face of the Martian. He lisped, "We have no desire for your humid and heavily gravitized planet. We who trade here can hardly wait to return to our home world."

"Then why do you sell us *dwarr*?" Franz Mect cut in. "Is it because your own civilization is on the downgrade, and you're jealous of our potential growth to new heights?"

There was contempt in the other's lisping answer. "Our thivilization ith on the decline no more than ith yourth." The green hue of his eyes had lessened, a sign that he was losing his fear of us, becoming defiant.

I growled at him. "The decline on Terra is caused by the Martian Poppy. Why do you sell it to us?"

"We thell you *dwarr* to thecure the titanium," he lisped sadly. "It ith the only thing we theme to have in quantity that you of earth dethire."

Franz Mect snorted. "But you don't use titanium to any extent. What do you do with it?"

The little Martian was silent. His antenna pointed forward slightly, a sign he was being stubborn. Obviously, he'd reached the point where he wanted to go no further.

Doctr Gardnr sensed that we'd

touched on the crucial point. "What do you do with the titanium we give you for your *dwarf*?" he said urgently.

AFTER a long moment of silence from the alien trader, I sneered, "You boys better leave again. I'll do a little work on him." I put my hand into my pocket for the penknife. "He cheated me before," I said, licking my lips nervously, "started talking before I even touched him." I pressed the button and the blade flicked out wickedly.

The desperate little Martian's eyes went verdure in color and his antenna sagged in fear. "Thith ith illegal," he lisped rapidly, "don't let him do thith to me."

"Talk," I barked.

The others turned to go. I noted from the side of my eyes that even Franz, who'd known me all my life was staring at me with an edge of uncomfortableness. They hurried for the door as though to be out of the way before I started the actual horror of physical violence.

"Yeth!" the Martian yelled suddenly, "Yeth, I'll tell you!"

Doctr Gardnr turned and said softly, "What do you do with the titanium?"

The Martian drooped. "We thell it to the Venuthians," he lisped sadly.

We stood silent for a long moment in incredulity.

Finally Franz Mect cleared his throat and said, "But what do you get from the Venusians for the titanium?"

The frail Martian straightened to the extent possible within his bonds, into his wistful face came a gleam as though of inspiration brought on by something greater, something more important than any of us.

He lisped proudly, "They thell us *maridee*. *Maridee*, do you hear? Now do you know why no Martian ever uthuth *dwarf*? Now do you know?" His green eyes blazed fanatically. "Who would ever uth *dwarf* wonth he had tathted the playthurths of *MARIDEE*!"

After long minutes, someone said, unbelievably, "But the Venusians haven't an economy advanced enough to use titanium. What do they do with it?"

The fire had left the little Martian's eyes. He slumped back into his chair again, his face showing puzzlement. "We've often wondered," he lisped sadly.

THE END

Bouncing Conversation!



By MAX LONG



A NUMBER of small telephone installations use microwave radio to do the job. This works fine in the open spaces because the radio waves travel in straight lines just like light does. But what do you do with such a system when there's a mountain or two in the way?

Nothing daunted, the engineers handle that one, too. Instead of sending the directional radio waves straight toward the objective, they seek out clear paths and put suitable reflectors in the way. In this fashion they bounce the radio waves from one screen to another, right around the

intervening mountains, a sort of "Tinkers-to-Evers-to-Chance" proposition.

The use of microwave communication systems holds great promise. It's a lot easier to set up a sending and receiving station than it is to lay wires between two points separated by as much as fifty or seventy-five miles. The time is coming—not immediately of course, but soon—when communications are going to be needed in a very mountainous region—the surface of the Moon! Microwave systems with suitable reflectors are the clear-cut answer!

SECRET of the DEATH DOME

By Walter M. Miller, Jr.

THE MARTIANS came in a huge dome from out of the sky and sat it down in the desert, to watch. Earth was their zoo, and their dome an impregnable cage. So it seemed at first. Then it was whispered in the halls of Man that Earth was the cage, and the dome was the *Outside*. For Man had thrown himself in vain fury against the dome's outer surface, while the dome-men yawned and watched from their unassailable fortress.

Their mission was obscure. They did not attack. Neither did they offer friendship. For ten years thereafter Earth was like a house of glass. Man lived in it uneasily, but without change. Boys who were eleven had grown to adulthood with the dome as a constant, ominous shadow. They were tired of hearing about it. They got married and had children. Martians? So what?

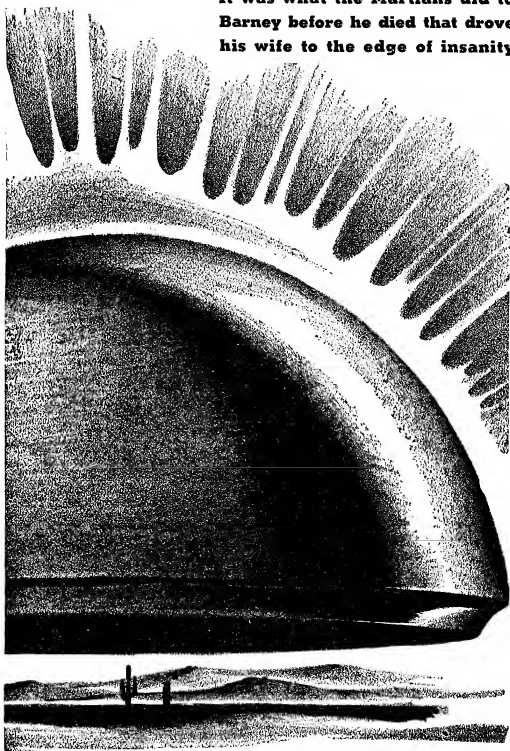
A state of war existed in theory. The Martians had behaved in a manner that justified war. They seized curiosity-seekers and used them as

specimens. The dome was the target of the most magnificent of Earth weapons. Its resistance was passive. It sat unharmed. Martian hostility was evidently only curiosity. And when H-bombs exploded harmlessly, Earthmen blushed and ceased the attacks to save themselves embarrassment.



The dome hovered there, silent and mysterious, while Jerry inched his way toward it.

**It was what the Martians did to
Barney before he died that drove
his wife to the edge of insanity**



For want of a better course, they ignored the dome.

But the military maintained an alert. Towns grew up at a safe distance from the dome to house scientific investigators and the men who patrolled the neighboring desert. They had jobs to do—routine jobs with government salaries.

Then Barney Willis came in out of the desert and died. Another specimen for the Martians. He died at the edge of town. Masterson, the blacksmith, saw him pitch off his horse and lie in the road. He saw the uniform of the special patrol—blue and gray—fluttering in the hot wind off the desert. He went out and felt his wrist: then he called the colonel.

The colonel sent Jerry Harrison to see about it. Jerry was just a sergeant, but there wasn't any need for brass. Death is for privates. And Barney's death was his wife's tough luck, but it was nothing new. Of course, the colonel didn't stop to think that Barney was Jerry's best friend—so good a friend that they were still friends after Barney married Jerry's girl. Big blond Barney with the damn-fool grin and thin hard Jerry with the angry eyes—side-riders. Mac-Pearson, who ran the Tavern, chained a couple of barstools together for them as a joke. Sort of a marriage ceremony, he said.

JERRY GOT to Barney while the crowd was gathering. Barney was a limp heap. The blank face looked queer without its grin. Stand back, stand back for the special patrol! Give him light! It's almost dark and he's got to see!

There wasn't any blood. The body was still hot—too hot, fresh from the desert and the sun.

"You women scram," Jerry growled. "I'm going to loosen his clothes. It may not be pretty."

The women retreated to the outer circle.

"How long is this going to last?" somebody wanted to know.

"Blow them off the planet, I say!" said a plump man in a business suit.

Jerry opened the dead man's shirt. No chest wound. The abdomen, maybe. Maybe they borrowed his liver to see how it worked. They were like that.

"Blow the dome ten light-years into space!" said the plump man. "If we can't dent it, we can move it half to hell."

"Then what'll we breathe for air?" asked a calm voice. "Alpha particles? Do you realize how much uranium . . ."

Jerry loosened the dead-man's belt. Then he buckled it again lest the crowd see what he had seen. Earth men were funny about some things, especially in crowds. They might form a mob and go out to the dome. Damn-fool living, loving, hating humans.

"What's wrong with him, sergeant?" asked the plump man.

Jerry stood up with Barney in his arms. "He's dead. That's all." Then he added— "Sunstroke, mister."

It was true. Barney had left his hat at the dome. He'd left something else too. They'd closed the wound with the strange white film they used for surgery, so there wasn't any blood. But the crowd didn't have to know about that.

Jerry put him in the back of the station wagon and drove toward headquarters. He was glad Barney had left his hat behind. Barney would be glad too. He was *mercifully* dead. Because he wasn't a *man* anymore. And Betty was young and brown and firm as a grape. And loyal. She wouldn't have left him if he'd lived. She'd have moved to another bedroom to save embarrassment; but she'd have gone on cooking his meals

and singing while she worked. That was the way she was. Barney couldn't have faced it.

Knowing Barney, Jerry was puzzled. Why had he tried to come back at all?

Colonel Beck's rock-ugly face wore its usual hard hatred as he peered over the coroner's shoulder at the body laid out on a table under the glaring light. He turned to glare at Jerry who sat slumped by the door.

"Why the hell did they do *that*, sergeant?" he snapped.

Jerry shook his head.

The colonel cursed softly and looked back at the body: "You'd think they *knew* he just got married. You'd think they . . ." He paused and frowned. "Now how the hell would a damn sexless Martian think of a thing like *that*! Make an eunuch of him and send him home to his new bride. It beats me, sergeant."

"How do you know they're sexless?"

"Hell, man! Their broadcasts from the dome! Don't you listen?"

JERRY KNEW what he meant. The Martians barged in on the broadcast-band to ask questions about earth biology and other things that they couldn't learn by dissecting captives. They offered information about Martian society and Martian science in return. The government finally ordered that non-secret material be released to them in the hope that the brutal vivisections would cease. The dome-men replied by radioing lectures on Martian history, psychology, and physiology. But how much of it was true?

"What bothers me," Jerry muttered, "is why Barney came back *at all*—like that."

The colonel snorted indifferently.

"Maybe he had something to say. Maybe he found out something im-

portant that he wanted to report. Maybe . . ."

The colonel was impatient. "Use your head, sergeant," he said. "The Martians can erase a human mind like a blackboard. Nobody that's ever come back from them alive can remember anything about them. Even what they look like. You know that! They get through with a man and then pick the memories out of his mind like fleas off a dog."

It was true. Yonkers, who had left his legs in the dome, could remember riding out on patrol and passing the jutting rock. Then his memory cut off like a light. He could then remember being in a blackened room whose ceiling was so low that he had to stoop. Then memory stopped again. He remembered intense pain and a grating sensation in his legs, but no visual image accompanied it. The Martians pinched out just those memory images that they didn't want to be there.

"Maybe he knew or saw something that they didn't *know* he saw," Jerry suggested.

"That's silly!"

"Then why did he come back?"

"Because he wanted to *live*, man!"

With his new bride? Like that? The colonel didn't know Barney like Jerry did.

The coroner called it death by sunstroke, and there was no use running an autopsy.

"Sergeant Harrison," the colonel said sweetly. "I'm detailing *you* to find out what it was you think he saw. *You* take his patrol tomorrow."

Jerry nodded. He had meant to ask for it anyway. But Colonel Beck was angry. He had lost a scout. Good scouts were scarce. He couldn't get back at the Martians, so he took it out on Jerry. But Jerry was willing.

"Check your little theory, sergeant," the colonel went on in a sugary tone. "Get close to the dome. Poke around

a bit. Prod it with a stick, maybe. Don't forget your magnifying glass."

Jerry stiffened. No horseman had ever been that close—voluntarily. Only infantry and tanks.

"You think I'm afraid?" he asked.

"I don't give a damn whether you are or not!" Colonel Beck growled. "It's an order."

Jerry stood up to leave. "Yes, sir. I'll see what I can find."

The colonel's sadistic appetites were not yet satiated. "One other thing, sergeant," he said. "Take Willis home to his wife."

"Colonel! . . ."

"I'll call her, of course—and drop in to pay my respects tomorrow. But you take him home. The jailhouse is no place for a dead family man. We can get an embalmer out of the city tomorrow."

"I'd rather not. . ."

"Sergeant! You don't have to tell her what they did to him. Just sunstroke, that's all."

There was no arguing with him. Jerry obeyed reluctantly. It wasn't going to be a pleasant task—carrying Barney in to Betty. He drove as slowly as he could on the way.

Two questions troubled him. The colonel's and his own. How had such an amputation occurred to a sexless Martian? And—why had Barney come back—unless he knew something? There were a lot of *maybes*, but none seemed satisfying.

BARNEY'S house was like all the houses in the row—government construction—a white frame house with ivy-trellises. One thing was different—the woman who kept it. She stood in the doorway when they drove up—white, tight-faced, grim, beautiful. A strong girl. No girl to wail helplessly with grief. Barney knew her well—too well. She would sit and think and hate. She would be a

widow until the Martians were driven from the earth.

Jerry and the corporal took the stretcher up the walk. Barney was covered with a sheet. She held the door open for them.

"Save it, Jerry," she said when he opened his mouth. "The colonel called me."

No use complaining about it, she might have added. He did what he could for Earth.

They laid him out on the bed, and the corporal went back to the car. Betty bent over the body in the evening gloom that came from the window. And her thin fingers barely touched his yellow hair. Her own dark hair shrouded her face, a black curtain about her cheeks, hiding whatever she felt. Then she kissed him—lightly—as she might kiss a child. Jerry shuddered. A childish kiss. No use kissing him like a *man*, even in death. Not after what they did to him.

She turned, but he couldn't see her eyes in the dim light. Thank God for that! It hurt bad enough just to look at her; he had loved her long before Barney.

"When are we going to get even, Jerry?" Her voice was icy.

Vengeance—an Earth-woman's concept. Good old Earth, with its grief and its rage and its fiery hate. Martians couldn't feel such illogical emotions—so the broadcasts said.

"Sorry, Betty," he said weakly. "I'm just a scout, not a senator."

She watched him for a silent time. Then she turned away. "And I'm just a woman."

Her tone struck him like a slap. There were a lot of things in it—scorn, hate, determination.

He left as quickly as he could. He sent the corporal back with the car and walked homeward in the moonlight.

The Martian dome glimmered faintly in the distance across the desert. High, proud, evil. Shining in the moon-glow. What right had Martians to bask under the Earth's moon? He passed a couple with two small children—going home from the movie, maybe. Life went on; there was nothing else it could do. While the dome watched it.

The couple with the children reminded him of Barney. And Betty. She was built just right for bearing kids. Efficiently constructed....

Jerry hated himself suddenly for the thoughts that began creeping up from the depths. But hell! He couldn't help feeling what he did. The Id had a hairy chest and carried a stone axe; it never heard of moral law.

The Martians had no Id—so the lecturer said. Their minds operated entirely on the conscious level.

HE STOPPED in the Tavern for a beer. MacPearson saw him coming and sneaked around to unchain his stool from Barney's. But Jerry saw him do it. A hush fell over the place when he came in, and several voices murmured at him as he passed. "Sorry to hear about..."

He took a seat and the conversation picked up again. For awhile he listened to the angry voices.

"Get all the uranium on earth and blow the dome to hell!"

It was the old argument, and Jerry was sick of it. How to get rid of the dome. It had been blasted and bombed and gassed and infected with bubonic plague. But the dome's radio voice congratulated the bombardiers for their accuracy—on the aircraft command frequency. And thanked them politely—ominously, perhaps—for such an insight into Earth's military science. The dome was undented.

"Keep pumping lewisite into the vents. Their air-filters can't last for-

ever."

Jerry looked disgustedly at the speaker. But the speaker was too interested in his own opinions to notice. Everybody had helpful suggestions; but nobody was mad enough to spend millions of dollars and millions of lives. After all, who had died? Only a few scouts. Everyone was intellectually angry; no one was mad down deep in the belly. Except Betty, maybe.

And Jerry?

Why should Jerry be mad? Now he had a chance at Barney's widow. Wasn't that just fine?

He pushed his beer aside and left the bar quickly. He went home to a breezy bed. The wind came off the desert, bearing with it the familiar odor of—of whatever the Martians were doing. It kept him awake.

Four blocks away was another bed—with a dead man in it. And Betty sleeping on the couch. Life went on. And death.

Funny, though—the Martians didn't die. They just went to sleep and split in half like amoebae—and then there were two. They kept their sexless daddy's memories. Why not? Same brain, divided between them. The lecturer said so. Wouldn't it be funny if you could remember when your thousand-times-great grandfather bashed in his brother's head with a club? And stole his wife, maybe?

Betty. He kept thinking of Betty. *When are we going to get even, Jerry?* Vengeance. Earth-bound Betty, corn-fed, and raised up by common old earth-standards. A dark little snake who could love or sting.

Did she think hate would work better than H-bombs?

Did *he* hate the big pink bodies inside the dome? With the red stripe down the middle where they divided? The headless creatures with humps on their back for brain-cases? They

loved to have the line stroked—so the lecturer said. Maybe the lecturer lied. Maybe they *didn't* like to have the stripe stroked. Maybe they had screaming meemies if you even touched it. Everybody believed the lecturer. They drew sketches of the Martians from the lecturer's descriptions. But why should the lecturer lie about such trivialities?

The Martians were so polite. They thanked the scout when they plucked out his eye to see how he saw. Not torturers—just curious. And when the engineers burrowed under the dome secretly to plant a few H-bombs, the dome picked itself up out of the crater, sat down a mile away, and ignored the incident as a lady ignores a drunk.

JERRY COULDN'T sleep. He could hear Minnie shifting about restlessly in her stall. So he pulled on his boots and went out to keep company with his mare. Maybe she was thirsty. He had forgotten to water her.

But ten minutes later he had saddled up. He gathered his paraphernalia, swung into the familiar seat, and trotted westward under the midnight moon. The dome was a faint luminescence in the distance. He had no idea what he meant to do. It was just an urge.

He rode for two hours until he reached the row of stainless steel stakes that marked a five-mile circle around the dome. It was the scouting radius; he had ridden it thousands of times. He reined up and gazed at the hemispherical fortress. Its impenetrable surface shimmered slightly in the silvery light, like an asphalt road in the hot sun. Perhaps it was the desert air. Or perhaps the Princeton professor was right in his theory that the dome's metallic sheath was immersed in a field that increased the inter-molecular forces by a tremen-

dous amount.

The dome appeared to be sleeping peacefully under the moon. But Jerry knew that it was awake and watching. It saw the single rider on the scouting circle. It could devour him if it wished. But it could feel neither anger or amusement. Its only dangerous sentiment might be curiosity.

How many more days would he ride around it before they got curious? Or needed another specimen. Then they would pluck out his heart, or muse over his cortex. Or do what they did to Barney. He was helpless before it.

He dismounted and sat under the edge of a bluff to think. He felt more comfortable in the shadows. There was nothing he could do—except his job. Just ride circles around the beanpot and hope for the best.

Soon he dozed. He was awakened by a faint thump. He started up. Another thump. It came from nowhere in particular. He could feel it more than hear it. It was in the ground and in the air. Suddenly he knew what it was. It had happened to an old prospector once. He got too close to the dome and said he felt a kind of thudding in the air that grew and grew until it beat him senseless. He told about it just before he died of a brain hemorrhage.

Thunk! Thunk!

He winced and looked for a place to hide. Minnie neighed and strained at her rope. The *thunks* were little twinges in the bones.

Thunk! Thunk! Thunk!

Harder this time. He made a dash for the mare. But Minnie reared up with a shriek and the rope pulled loose from the rock. She set off homeward at a gallop.

The thudding stopped, as if its purpose had been accomplished. The Martians had driven away his horse. Why?

HE LOOKED around. He had stashed his Thompson sub and his walkie-talkie under the edge of the bluff. But he'd left the two canteens of water on the horse.

He thought of calling for help on the radio. But no one but the Martians guarded the frequency at night. He would have to wait for daylight, or try to go back on foot. But if the Martians wanted him, walking away would do no good. They could thump him down or prod him with the stinging beams that hurt on the side away from the dome and made the victim run screaming toward it, to escape the intense burning that followed behind.

He sat down under the bluff again to wait for dawn. He stared at the hateful fortress until he could close his eyes and see its after-image.

The sky grew gray, then red in the east. The dome took on the color of the sunrise. He called control. The channel was silent. He tried again in half-an-hour—this time with results.

"Scout Three from Control. What happened, Jerry? Your horse came trotting into town at six o'clock."

"Martians sent her scampering. Get somebody out here with another. Six miles east of the beanpot."

A cold metallic voice cut into the frequency. "That will be unnecessary. That will be unnecessary."

And that was all. The dome had spoken and fallen silent. Jerry breathed heavily into his mike but said nothing. He watched the dome fearfully. It *wanted* him. No use sending another horse.

The dispatcher lowered his voice as if to keep the Martians from hearing. "Sit tight, Jerry. We'll get somebody out there right away. We'll send everybody that's not out looking for Betty Willis."

Jerry found his voice again quickly. "Looking for who?"

"Betty Willis. She may be off her rocker. Sat up all night with the body. When your horse came in, she called up the colonel and said it was her fault. Something she said to you. Next thing you know somebody saw her galloping out of town. She's headed for rough country, or she'd have taken the car."

The metallic voice cut in again. "Tell us why the woman reacts in this manner. Tell us why she behaves illogically."

The dispatcher began cursing and went off the air to finish the oath.

"Hate, beanpot," Jerry hissed at his mike. He had nothing to lose by being brazen. "Now tell us one. Why did you do that to her husband?"

The voice came back calmly and quickly. "We wish to examine human heredity mechanisms. We wish to make a human organism. We have tried previously without success. Now we shall succeed."

Jerry's vision clouded with red flashes of hate. *Make a human organism!* "Why don't you just borrow one," he choked. "Me, for instance."

"Thank, you. But we wish to make several changes in the structure. Thank you."

JERRY PUSHED the walkie-talkie aside and stood up. Then he lifted it for a last word to the dispatcher. "When you find Betty, tell her we're going to get even." Then he dashed the radio to the rocks. And with the sub-machine gun under his arm, he began walking toward the dome.

He was running amok. He knew it. Don Quixote. Damn fool. They could kill him any instant. He was going to die. Foolishly. For nothing at all. He couldn't even make it count. Still he walked on.

Make a human organism!

And the Lord God made man of

the slime of the earth. And breathed in his face the breath of life. And man became a living soul. Maybe that wasn't true. But it sounded better than the way the Martians said it.

The impotency of his wrath! He realized it. It made him more angry. The meaninglessness of his gesture. Of his grim march toward the omnipotent enemy.

The radio was still working. Far behind him he could hear its voice. The dispatcher was calling excited questions. The Martian was asking about illogical behaviour.

Why didn't they shoot him? Or blast him with the thumping outfit. (Was it supersonic?)

A sane spark in Jerry's mind told him to go back. The sane spot spoke coldly, logically. But it had no control of his rage. For years he had ridden the circle, knowing every moment that he was helpless. A mouse stalking a tiger. A foolish strutting little earthling, at the mercy of the dome. He had grown to resent it more and more. Now the resentment broke the dam and swelled into a torrent of hate. He stalked onward.

In two hours he was within Tommy-gun range of the dome. He stopped to slip a fifty-round drum on his weapon. No one but infantry and tanks had been this close before. They had assaulted it futilely. It closed its shell and went to sleep while they gnawed at the impenetrable—*what?*

It looked like ordinary steel. But diamonds couldn't mark it. Uranium couldn't dent it. Acid was harmless to it. It was curiously non-conductive to electricity and heat; the Martians could not be roasted out. Its thermal conductivity had been estimated—somewhere around a billionth of a BTU per hour per degree Fahrenheit per cubic foot. It could sit on the surface of the sun for awhile with that kind of insulation.

JERRY FIRED a burst at it, just to spend a little anger. The bullets never ricocheted. They stuck to the surface, like iron to a magnet. Maybe the Princeton professor was right. There wasn't any such metal.

Well, here he was. And there it was. Why didn't they come out and get him? But they never came out. Even the desert was too humid to suit them. Moisture made them itch. The lecturer said so.

He was thinking more calmly now. They had let him come this close for a reason. Maybe they wanted to observe anger reactions. Martians couldn't feel anger. The lecturer—*damn* the lecturer! Maybe they'd take out his adrenals to see how they worked.

Maybe it gave them a warm feeling to see him wandering about helplessly. "There goes the enemy, but here we are nice and safe in our igloo."

The sun was getting hot. It gleamed on the glazed ground, where the uranium blasts had fused the rocks. Once the ground had been grazing land—poor land, to be sure, but covered with a sparse grass. But that part of the desert had had no rain for ten years. Since the Martians came. Mother Earth had changed her weather to suit Martian comfort. But the meteorologists said it was a coincidence.

He started walking around the dome. They knew he was there. They watched silently. They hadn't even bothered to retract the stilts it stood on. It sat on three short fat legs, its flat bottom three feet above the desert floor. When the infantry came, it pulled in the legs and sat down on its belly. Once it sat down on some of the infantry. They had crawled under to find an air-vent through which to pump gas. The Martians had evidently cleaned up the G. I. cadavers for specimens, because the ground be-

neath the dome was barren and boneless.

He shouted at the fort. "Come out and get me, you bastards! Come on!"

Of course they couldn't answer him without his radio. They had no vocal cords. But their bodies could generate radio waves and modulate them in any way they pleased. The lecturer said their synaptic connections were so quick-triggered they could perceive each separate pulse of audiofrequencies. And duplicate them exactly with a modulated carrier wave. That was the way they communicated with each other. They could vary their output from a whisper to a hundred watts.

"Well, damn it! Do something!" he shouted helplessly.

The desert was silent, and the dome shimmered in the heat. He glanced back toward town. A single rider was approaching the scouting circle. Too late now.

The sun was beating upon him heavily. His throat was dry and burning for water. He wandered about aimlessly for a time, cursing and firing bursts against the dome.

Hell, if they wouldn't come out, then he'd try to get in! There were bound to be vents under the dome. He slung the tommy-gun and crawled under the edge. The center would be the logical place to look. But it was a half-mile crawl. He set out determinedly on his hands and knees.

AS HE MOVED slowly and painfully along, the darkness deepened and the white desert sunlight was a painful band of brightness in the distance. Folly upon folly. The Martians were playing with him. Willfully he was moving into their trap. When he was far enough under, they would start to sit down—slowly, so he would make a run for safety. Then when he was almost out, they would

drop their low, flat belly upon him. He began to feel the things a claustrophobic feels.

I'm just a woman, Jerry. Betty's scorn was a whip that lashed him on. Or maybe the scorn wasn't in her tone, but rather—in his own conscience. And in the conscience of the world. *Why isn't humanity man enough to do something?*

A sudden shrill sound made him freeze. It came from behind. Far behind. He knew the death-shriek a horse sometimes makes. It chilled him. A rider had followed him to the dome. The Martians had killed the animal—and perhaps the rider.

He crawled on.

He kept bumping against the ceiling. Had the dome moved, or was the ground rising slightly? The metal felt body-temperature,—illusively. But that was because it was non-conductive, according to the Princeton theory. The physicists said it was near absolute zero, its molecules locked tightly in place by the strength of a field which was thought to irradiate it from within. The particles could not even vibrate with heat energy. What would happen if the field were suddenly released? A wine-glass dropped in molten steel?

His hands and knees were bloody from the rough ground. But as he neared the center, he felt a strong draft of air. He was approaching a vent.

He found it by moving down-wind and feeling with his hands. He could see nothing but the thin vein of white light around the rim of the dome.

He found it—and his heart sank. It was protected by heavy louvers, set a few inches back in the opening. He stretched out in exhaustion beneath the vent. A gale of air arose about him. He fired a short burst up into the vent, but nothing happened.

The sound was deafening, and the flashes lit up the blackness for a moment. That was all.

He lay quietly recovering his strength and waiting.

Thump! Thump!

He felt the shocks pass through him and his hand went numb. At close range, the sonic cone was narrow. It missed his body. The Martians were firing in darkness. He looked around quickly. Something broke the thin vein of light. A silhouette! It moved, a few feet away.

He rolled over and blasted at it with the tommy-gun. Something crumpled and fell to the ground. Then the metallic slam of a hatch closing. He crawled to his target and felt it cautiously. A hot gritty little body. Hard as a rubber tire. But the rubber had holes in it, and they oozed a thick, viscous fluid that began to crystallize in the dry air. Martian bodies were dry-fleshed.

But was *this* a Martian? He had seen sketches of them, done from the lecturer's descriptions. The sketches were wrong. He could tell just by feeling the body. The wrongness was quantitative. The sketches showed huge, thick-limbed creatures. This dead beast was bony and rather small. The lecturer had lied. Why? Were they afraid, in spite of their impenetrable dome?

HE STRUCK a match and looked. A spindly, pink, headless creature, whose brain was in the bulge on its back. The dividing line was a livid red scar that ran along the bulge and around under the belly, marking the creature exactly in half.

Before the match flickered and burned his fingers, he made another discovery. The lecturer had lied more than once. He said the Martians were sexless. But this dead thing was ob-

viously *a female!*

It startled him. They might try to hide weakness with lies. But why sex?

They split, all right, like the lecturer said. There was the red scar. But two sexes. The female probably must be fertilized before she could divide. And perhaps the male couldn't divide at all. The male shouldn't have the scar—or else only a vestigial one.

But why the secrecy?

He shifted uncomfortably in the cramped darkness and bumped his head on the ceiling. His hands flew upward, and his palms pressed against it, like Atlas supporting the sky.

He choked back a scream.

The dome was sitting down. The ceiling was moving slowly but perceptibly. The desert was half a mile away.

He crawled back to the vent and fought at the louvers with his hands. They were of the field-strengthened metal. But they were recessed a few inches. If he lay under the vent, he would have another minute or two of life—before he was cut in neat slices.

He cursed his foolishness. He cursed Colonel Beck and the Martians. He thought a curse at Betty, then drew it back. She couldn't help saying what she had done.

He fired a burst into the dust again. No effect. He shouted insults into the black maw. The dome settled without a pause.

"I came to bargain with you," he called in desperation. "The government sent me."

The descent continued, but after a moment a loud-speaker voice crackled in a monotone. "That is an untrue statement. We have observed your duties. You spoke an untrue statement." The voice was coldly polite.

He shrieked more curses at them. "Your emotions are interesting," the loudspeaker noted. "We are recording your audible expressions. Would you

please notify us when pain begins?"

He fell silent. The louvers were about two feet above the ground, now. He tried digging in the earth, but it was caked and dry. The blast of air faded as the fans were shut off. Then he heard the slow scrape of doors closing above him. He reached through the louvers and felt the metal jaws pulling together. But they stopped ajar. The Martians would leave a narrow opening so they could hear and record his pain-sounds.

The ceiling pressed down. He was flat on his back and trying not to cry out in fear. In a minute or so, he would feel the vise-grip. The dead Martian, who was not under the vent, was already caught in it. He could hear the popping sounds she made, and the damp hiss when her air-sac ruptured. Pressed like a flower in a book.

THE LOUVERS touched him lightly. He called into the vent to keep from screaming.

"I tell you the government sent me to bargain!"

"That is an untrue statement. We have refused such offers. You spoke an untrue statement."

The pressure was robbing him of breath. "Not as untrue as the damn lies your lecturer tells."

There was a long silence.

"Would you repeat that, please?"

He repeated it as best he could.

There was another silence, during which the pressure stopped increasing.

"Would you please explain your meaning?" the loudspeaker asked coldly. "And give the origin of such a belief."

Jerry stalled for a few more minutes of life. "You're no more sexless than earthmen. Your broadcasts were lies."

"What is the origin of such a be-

lief?"

"Barney told us before he died. It's going to be common knowledge."

The Martians were apparently slow thinkers. Slow but accurate. Soon they would remember the dead female under the dome.

"That is an untrue statement. The scout's memory was sifted before he was released."

The pressure began to increase again.

"He saw something you *didn't know he saw!*" Jerry shrieked.

Gradually the pressure stopped again. A long silence. Apparently they were mulling it over. He waited. Then—

Thunk, thunk... from out of the vent.

The blast rocked his senses. He squirmed helplessly and moaned. His skull was bursting.

THUNK, THUNK, THUNK THUNK...

He shrank and cringed under the sledge-hammer shocks. They seemed to explode inside his head. They came faster.

TUK TUK TUK TUK TUK...

Gratefully he surrendered himself to the tide of blackness.

HE AWOKE in a dim room. His skin was brittle. His mouth was numb with dryness. The ceiling was absurdly low—but high enough for Martian stature. He was obviously inside the dome.

He moved. Pain stabbed a thousand needles in him. He was bound with thread-thin barbed wire. The movement caused the tiny pinpoints to bite his flesh. He moved again, and moaned.

"Do not stir," said a voice. "The wire is coated with an irritant. Motion will cause sufficient pain to result in fainting."

Jerry carefully turned his head to

see the source of the voice. It came from *his walkie-talkie!* It was on a low table. A Martian female stood nearby. It was like watching a ventriloquist.

"Your statement was untrue," the Martian went on. "The scout told nothing. You simply examined the dead Yy-Da beneath the vent. The scout died before speaking to another Earthman."

"What makes you think so?"

"We have questioned another captive."

Jerry watched the female warily. She seemed to feel no anger or sorrow for her dead compatriot. Her insect-like eyes gazed at him blankly as she crouched in the queer Martian stance. The red welt down the center of her body made her look cleft by a sword.

"Who is the captive?" he asked.

"It is the Earth female. It is the female of the scout. It is—"

"Good Lord! *Betty!*"

"That is a true statement."

He lurched toward the Martian in a rage. She listened calmly to his howl of pain and watched him stiffen into immobility as the snake-fangs of the wire pierced his body. He sickened with shock. The wires were worse than a black swarm of angry wasps.

"That was an illogical action."

He wished fervently that they would keep their analyses of his behaviour to themselves.

"What are you going to do with her?" he groaned.

"We need parts of the human organism as models." She paused, then said, "This is an ineffective and illogical procedure. You will remember nothing of what I tell you. Therefore it is a waste of time for you to ask."

He tested the wires again and winced. He could break them—but perhaps have an immediate convulsion. The Martians evidently had a

great respect for pain. They didn't expect him to try. Maybe he'd faint, but when the time came...

She saw him examining his bonds. "The irritant is also a debilitating agent," she said. "If you continue stirring, you will become too weak to move. That would be illogical."

His mouth was cottony. "Can I have water?" he asked.

She hesitated for a moment, then shuffled silently out of the room. Cautiously he tried to slip out of his loosely wrapped bonds. But the wires adhered to his skin like tape. Soon he was in agony. It was no use. He felt sure a sudden muscular surge would burst them, but it was too early to try it. He had no plan. No way to escape.

THE MARTIAN was gone a long time. He stared at the walkie-talkie. Betty had probably found it and picked it up before they caught her. Maybe she'd used it to call for help—not that it would do any good.

The Martian shuffled back with a ping-pong ball full of dirty fluid. A flexible tube was attached. She held it away from her distastefully and kept the tube pinched closed. He remembered that Martians took a drink about once a month. Moisture made them itch, except when their systems required the tiny periodic amount.

He took the water in a quick suck. It furred his teeth. Full of iron—probably Martian water. A ten-year supply would be a light load for such a small consumption. When their skins became numb, they knew they were thirsty—the lecturer said. They drank a small amount, scratched happily, then were disgusted with themselves and let it alone for another month.

"I need *water*," he said. "A whole bucket of it."

She thought about it for a moment.

"It will be necessary to take you to the water. There is no large closed container available."

She was afraid of even the nearness of water. Apparently the slight evaporation caused itching.

She loosened the wires that bound his legs by painting his skin with a clear oil that caused them to pull away easily and painlessly. He watched for an opportunity to kick at her braincase. He spoke to distract her.

"What's in store for me here, Gertrude?"

"We wish to trace out the synaptic connections which deal with rage, lust, and hate in the human organism."

"I don't get it."

"Certain areas of your cortex will be paralyzed. Then you will be offered various stimuli and your behaviour observed. We will find the areas which affect these emotions which we do not possess."

He tentatively aimed a foot at the center of her abdomen. "What sort of stimuli?"

"The ones which normally evoke rage, lust, or fear, respectively. It will require considerable time. Your brain will gradually be destroyed."

He held the foot back for a moment. "Lust?..."

"You forget that we have one of your females. You will be closed together in a room. The logical functioning of your brain will be paralyzed..."

He lashed out with his foot. She caught it in her claws and forced it to the floor easily. There was strength in the thin Martian arms.

"Such behaviour will result in continued thrust," she warned calmly.

He subsided. She wrapped wire around his neck and fastened it to his knees, so that he would have to walk hunched over and take mincing steps. She produced a small device that

looked like a camera, pointed it at the drinking container on the table, and snapped a lever. The ping-pong ball exploded into a fine powder, and a low *thump* filled the room. It was a convincing reminder of the bludgeoning he had received beneath the dome.

"You will walk ahead," she announced, and lifted the radio from the table.

THEY STEPPED into the corridor.

An occasional expressionless Martian passed as they moved along. Jerry managed to crane his neck to get a glimpse of each—all females. Maybe the women were the workers.

"After you drink, you will be put to sleep until you are needed," his guard told him. "You will be spared any pain that is not necessary to our work."

"That's good of you, Gertrude."

"Thank you."

He snapped a curse at her, and expected a thump from the device she carried. But she showed no anger.

They entered a huge circular room with a bulging ceiling. The top of the dome, perhaps. He looked around as best he could. Machinery. Heavy, complicated machinery of massive design. The room smelled of the strange foul odor that sometimes blew toward the town. Some of the machinery was lead shielded. Ductwork led from it to the ceiling. The ducts were yellow helices that glowed with a faint corona discharge. Some sort of wave-guides, perhaps. They all passed through the jaws of a tremendous electro-magnet before they spiralled upward. Near the ceiling they straightened, and each duct flared out into a flat sort of reflector, focused upward. He tried to trace the ductwork back to its origin.

"You will move faster, please," said the radio speaker. "And keep looking at the floor."

The Martian didn't want him to in-

spect the machinery. The ducts with the hovering corona—did they supply the field to the outer shell of the dome? And if the field were suddenly destroyed...

He stole another glance toward the electromagnet.

Thunk! The Martian gave him a light jolt with the sonic gun. It staggered him. The wires needled him painfully.

"Look at the floor, please."

He looked at the floor and walked in the direction she indicated. He had seen what he wanted to see. The ducts all ended in a spherical shell surrounded with gold-colored tubing.

They passed into another corridor. Still he had seen no Martians but females. As they moved along they passed a flanking wall of glass-partitioned cells. A few of the cells were occupied by pink sleepers in various stages of division. He found the sight revolting.

"Where's all the men, Gertrude?" he asked suddenly.

He got another throb from the gun. Just enough to make him wince. He bit his lip with rage.

"You will ask no more questions," said the female.

Two things he wasn't supposed to know about—the machinery and Martian sex. Two weaknesses of some sort?

THEY MOVED onto a narrow catwalk and approached a large cylindrical tank. The tank was on stilts above some kind of rotating machinery below the catwalk. Pipes ran downward from it. He could feel hot currents of air arising from the machinery. Apparently the tank contained either condensate or cooling-liquid. The frame of the machinery glowed a dull red.

"Here is the water. You will drink now."

She found a flexible hose with a valve, then loosened the wires about his neck and held the hose to his mouth. She kept the gun on his belly and one hand on the valve. She didn't want any of the irritating fluid to spill. The water was hot, but he drank greedily of it. When his thirst was satisfied, he filled his cheeks with it. Then he nodded that he was finished. She cut off the valve.

"We will go now," she said as she replaced the hose.

Now or never! He spurted the mouthful of water at her. It drenched her gritty skin. She cringed. The thump-gun punched, and the sonic blast spun him sideways. The radio shrieked gibberish. She clawed at herself and dropped the gun.

He struggled against the wires. They burst. The sudden pain was maddening. He screamed and fell. Nausea caught him. Vertigo. To faint was to die. He lurched about on his hands and knees, tearing at the adhesive wires. They came loose from his back like the ripping off of his own skin.

He found the thump-gun and pawed at it weakly. Gertrude was doing spidery contortions on the floor.

He aimed at the tank and fired the gun. Not even a dent. There was a dial-setting on the weapon. He twisted it to the extreme and fired again. The recoil hurt his wrists and sent him off balance. This time there was a dent in the cylinder. He kept on firing, and the dent grew deeper.

Quick shuffling steps were ringing on the catwalk behind him. Martians! He continued concentrating on the dent. It grew deeper. The metal gave way and a thin jet of dirty water spurted out.

The fringe of a sonic blast caught him from the rear and sent him on his face, half-conscious. But he heard the spitting hiss of the water-jet as it

struck the red-hot furnace. Billowing clouds of steam rolled over him. He glanced weakly around to see the Martians beating a terrified retreat before the advancing vapor.

He lay gaining strength for a moment. The first skirmish was won. Now to find Betty.

Gertrude was in a twitching coma. Perhaps she would die if her crystalline hide became saturated. He needed her help. He strapped on the walkie-talkie.

He caught her two-toed foot and dragged her along the catwalk. The steam was rolling along the walls and floor. He turned a corner and came to a glass door with a guard post beside it. The guard had suddenly left for a dryer climate. Beyond the door was a tiny cubicle with a smaller door in the opposite wall. The guard post suggested a prison cell. He dragged the limp Martian into the cubicle.

The smaller door was locked. He pressed a button in its center. A motor whined. He felt a sudden draft. The cubicle was an airlock. His ears crackled with the changing pressure. In a few moments he was gasping for breath. But the door to the corridor had locked automatically. He was trapped.

Suddenly the draft died out. The motor groaned to a stop. Then the small door slid slowly open.

HE STARED into a large, weirdly-lit room. The walls were rust-red panoramas of Martian scenery. Light came from orbs suspended from a black ceiling—the moons of Mars. A blue gray dawn-light was reaching up behind a range of hills. It was like a visit to the fourth planet. Even the thin, dry atmosphere was duplicated. He was choking for breath.

But the female was reviving quickly. He dragged her into the large room. Then he saw its occupant. An-

other Martian lay asleep on a satin couch in the center of the room. Asleep, but not dividing.

He kicked the quaking female. She stopped squirming and gazed at him without anger. For an instant he felt remorse. Her even stare was like turning the other cheek; she couldn't get mad. Then he remembered that Martians could feel no pity either. He kicked her again. She showed fear.

"Where is Betty?" he demanded.

Her blank stare was a direct refusal. He shifted the gun to low and gave her brain-case several quick twinges. The radio crackled with static.

"She'll be dead before you reach her," said the Martian.

"Then I'll kill you now," he snapped.

She was afraid for herself, but she was also afraid for her race, apparently. She remained silent. He set the gun to medium and jolted her in the belly. She doubled with pain.

The sleeping Martian was stirring. Jerry turned the gun toward the couch.

"No! Do not shoot the male!" The burst came loudly from the radio.

The male? He backed to a position where he could cover them both and stared at the rousing sleeper. The male was thin and weak. The crystalline coating had worn away in spots, leaving smooth places on his wrinkled hide. He was old. And there was no red welt down his middle.

"Tell me where Betty is!"

"She will be dead before you reach her."

"Then I'll kill you both. Uncle Fidgety first."

He aimed the gun at the tottering male, who stood staring stupidly at him, as if unaware of what was happening.

"No! I will tell you where to find her!" the female called quickly. "Do

not kill the male."

SHE CLIMBED anxiously erect and placed herself between Jerry and the old one.

"That's better!" he snapped. "Call the others. Tell them to bring her here. And no tricks. Stay on this frequency and use earth-language."

"They cannot come here," she said. "They cannot endure the moisture in the corridors. They will be crowding in the drying rooms. If the skin becomes moisture-clogged, they die of suffocation. We take in oxygen through our skins. Our air-sacs are for hydrogen feeding."

"I don't give a damn if they die or not. Do what I say."

"There is a more logical way," she said. "The male has two suits of moisture-proof plastic for his personal use. I will wear one of these and take you to the girl."

"And be led into a trap? No, thanks. Tell your cronies to direct her to the central power room. Where the *field generators* are."

It was a stab in the dark, but it struck home. She straightened and emitted a surprised crackle of static.

He laughed. "So they *are* field generators!"

She was silent.

"Call the others!" he ordered.

He was beginning to totter in the rarefied air. The female was watching him closely for signs of weakness, and she was stalling for time. He gave her a thump, but missed. She edged toward him. Swaying and gasping he turned the gun toward the male.

"I will call the others," she said quickly.

She went into a deeper crouch and seemed to be straining inwardly. The radio was suddenly blocking, and feedback whined in the audio stage. Her output was reaching out to the others. He turned down the volume

and listened.

"...man-organism threatens to destroy male. Do not molest Earth female. Free her at once and direct her to central control. Man-organism threatens to destroy cherished male."

"And tell her I'll be there," Jerry snapped.

She relayed the information, while he tried to breathe.

"All right," he snapped. "Let's go to central control—both of you!" His heart was pounding. Bright specks in his eyes.

Static crackled again. "It is not necessary to take the male," she protested. "Why do you take ..."

"He makes a good hostage, dearie. Let's go."

She found the moisture-proof suits and began helping the male into one of them. Jerry's breath was failing. He thumped them lightly. The male cringed.

"Put 'em on—in the airlock," Jerry gasped.

They moved into the small room. He jabbed at the button and his mind went black for a moment. But the female was taking no chances. The pumps whined, and after a few moments Jerry was sucking in the good moist air of the corridor. The male was scratching and dancing feebly as he scrambled into his suit.

"It'd be hell if you got caught in the rain," Jerry snapped disgustedly.

The female took him seriously. "We have prevented it from raining here," she said coldly. "Eventually we shall stop all precipitation on your planet. The water will stay in the seas, and our people will live in comfort."

Rage gripped him again. He sent her sprawling with a sonic blast. She shook herself, and climbed slowly erect.

"Let's start moving," he snarled.

"You will never escape alive," she

said as she moved ahead of him. "The moisture is passing."

IT WAS true. The steam had condensed on the walls and was already evaporating again as the air-dryers worked furiously. As they passed the water tank, he noticed that the leakage had drained its contents to the level of the hole and had stopped. Soon the Martians would be coming out of the drying rooms in full strength—with more potent weapons than sonic guns.

So they wanted to borrow the earth and make it a desert! Keep the water in the seas. Make the land like arid Mars. Jerry thought about the field-strengthened skin of the dome. To release the field? A wine glass dropped in molten steel. And destruction to all within, perhaps?

And destruction to Betty and himself. He was no hero.

The thin male staggered feebly beside the female. She led him by the arm. Jerry wondered if all the Martian males were like that—or perhaps he was a senile king or priest. There seemed to be an acute scarcity of males.

Betty was standing alone in the power-room when they hurried in. She was glancing nervously about at the machinery which dwarfed her tiny figure and towered over her. She saw them enter, and hurried toward Jerry with frightened eyes. She was dark and pretty in her jeans and riding boots. And she was unharmed—except for the red welts about her arms from the adhesive wires. He murmured thankfully.

He wanted to hug her—and then he saw that she had something like that in mind. So he glared at her. She was Barney's widow.

"Why the hell did you come out here?" he bawled at her.

She stopped and looked hurt. "I

thought I could stop you. I thought you came out here because I said—"

"Never mind!" he snapped. "Let's get out of it!"

"Wait, Jerry!" she said excitedly. "I found out what they're going to do. They're going to conquer the Earth and dry up the—"

"I know it. Let's go."

"But can't we *do* something?"

He hesitated. "Listen, I'll get you outside, and then I'll come back..."

There was a distinct murmur of pleasure from the loud-speaker. He glanced at the Martian female.

"You like the idea, do you, Gertrude?"

The Martian was silent.

"There isn't time, Jerry," Betty said. "And I'm sticking with you. Can't we wreck some of this stuff?"

"We'd be sacrificing..."

HE DIDN'T finish. Three Martians sped into the power room and ducked behind a generator. Their pink bodies were dusted with white—an absorbent powder, perhaps. A transparent globule sailed over the generator and burst at their feet. A white vapor floated up from it. The female scurried away from it and dragged the male behind her.

"Hold your breath!" he snapped at Betty. They ran after the Martian hostages, and he snapped a sonic throb at them.

They stopped and looked back at the white vapor. It suddenly flared into a flash of greenish flame and disappeared.

"An anaesthetic," he said to Betty. "They won't hurt the male."

The room was suddenly thronging with Martians. They sent a flanking movement along the outer wall, and Jerry fired rapid thumps at the scurrying little bodies as they leaped across the open stretches.

"This way!" he called, and led

Betty toward the golden sphere with its radial ducts. "That mess of yellow pipe. It's the key to the dome."

He no longer had time for the female hostage, but he dragged the male behind him. The female set up a howl on the radio and followed at a safe distance.

"Call off the hounds, Gertrude," he shouted at her. "Or I'll punch holes in your ductwork."

"That would be an illogical action," said the radio in his hand. "The whole dome would collapse. You and the Earth-female would be destroyed."

Betty gripped his arm tightly as they ran. "Do it, Jerry," she panted. "Do it and don't worry. It's worth it."

"Feel like dying, honey?" he asked her weakly.

They came to the base of the sphere and pulled the wilting male between them. A circle of pink bodies was slowly closing in from all sides. Jerry kept firing, but none of his blasts were lethal. Martians fell and arose again. Evidently the power of the sonic weapon needed replenishing. There was little choice. Either waste the last of its energy on the attackers, or fire at the ducts.

"Do it, Jerry," she begged. "It's our only chance. It's Earth's only chance, anyway."

He had moved away from the sphere to look up at the ducts. Suddenly a thump-gun blast caught him below the hips and sent him careening to the floor. He tried to get up, but his leg wobbled sideways and bent between his knee and ankle. Broken! Martians were rushing in for the kill. He fell back in pain and stabbed a sonic blast at a stretch of duct above him. It dented the metal. A shock-wave rocked the dome. A pulse of high-pitched sound pierced the control room.

The Martians had halted.

"Do not fire again," blared the

radio. "Your rage destroys yourself. That is illogical. Do not shoot."

"Stay back, then," he warned.

"Shoot, Jerry, shoot!" Betty was screaming. "Don't wait."

HE GRINNED at her weakly. He was no Samson--to pull the temple down on his own head. But if he *had* to do it. . . .

"Come here, Gertrude," he snarled at the Martian female, and kept the gun pointed at the duct.

She obeyed quickly. "Do not shoot. That would be illogical."

"Turn your output down to a whisper."

She obeyed. "Do not fire again at the duct."

"Then get us out of here. We'll take the male as a hostage."

"No. That would be unsatisfactory."

He snorted his contempt. "Is one sorry male worth more to you than the whole works?"

"He is the only male," she said. "You will not take the male."

The *only* male! So that's why Martian sex was a weakness. If anything happened to the male . . .

"The only male of your whole race?" he asked.

"There are two others on our planet. Both are as old as this one. There was a great plague. And no male has been born of a separation since that time. The plague attacks the male during division. We find that the plague virus cannot exist on earth."

"So you decided to move in on us and take over."

"That is our intention."

"Blast the ductwork, Jerry!" Betty was begging. "They keep moving closer."

He glanced around at the circle of Martians. They were edging nearer and nearer.

He grinned at Betty. "Bring the male over here," he called to her. "And don't ask questions."

She obeyed, and the old Martian followed her tug without protest. He seemed not to understand what was happening.

"You won't lead us out of here? With the male as a hostage?" he asked the female.

"We will not, Earthman." She made a sudden move toward him.

He blasted her, and she sat down weakly. But the gun had been turned to full strength. It should have crushed her.

"Now there is not enough energy in the device to puncture the field-guides," she said triumphantly.

The Martians began to close in again. He didn't like the thing he was about to do, because he knew what pity was. But he also knew the smell of a cornfield in the rain, and the gurgle of a happy baby, and the look on Betty's face when she married Barney—and all the other things of earth that tie a man down to his race and his kin and his great-green planet.

He shot the Martian male in the belly. He doubled up weakly and crumpled. Jerry dragged the quivering old beast to his side.

The radio was raging and Betty was wrestling with the female. The others were plunging swiftly toward him.

He pressed the sonic gun against the male's brain-case and fired again. The creature lay still. He kept firing until clawed hands seized him roughly and pulled him away. He felt the shattering pain of his fracture compounding as they dragged him across the floor. He moaned and grew faint.

WHEN HE was fully conscious again, Betty was bending over him and holding his head.

"Why don't they kill us?" she asked.

He glanced toward the dead male. A quivering, pulsating, excited circle of Martian females was gathered about his body.

"Why don't you run while you can?" he asked her in return.

"And leave you here?" She shook her head.

He chuckled. "That's what I wanted to know. Don't worry. They won't bother us now. They can't feel anger or rage. And we're no good to them as specimens anymore, because their mission's a failure. They'll die if they don't go back to Mars."

"Why?"

"Well, why did they bring a male with them on a dangerous mission in the first place? Not to build up numbers; this was a preparatory mission. They could have brought the males later. But the male is undoubtedly very necessary to them."

He reached for one of the sonic guns dropped by the panicky females. "Come here, Gertrude," he called.

She broke away from the mourning circle and approached them slowly as if in a daze.

"What happens to a Martain female if she isn't fertilized?" he asked.

"When it is time to divide, she will go to sleep," she answered dully. "But in dividing, she will die."

"Next question. When are you leaving?"

"Immediately."

He waved the gun in the general direction of the yellow helices. "Of course you'll call our men and inform them. And have someone come pick us up."

She kept her eyes on the gun. "You are useless to us now. We cannot risk another male on this planet. We cannot return. We have no need for you. We shall release you."

He grinned at Betty. "Well, baby. Are we even now? Here's a couple of hundred widows to your one."

She looked away sadly but not angrily. "It was Earth I was thinking about, Jerry. Not just Barney."

"Sure, I know. Everybody was thinking about Earth. But nobody was really down-deep *mad*. It takes a big mad to win a fight. And Martians just can't get mad."

HE WAS in bed with a plaster cast when the dome blasted off. They watched its bright yellow streak taper up into the night sky—and disappear into the clouds. Too bad they couldn't see the faint red eye of Mars.

"Why were they mutilating people, Jerry?" she asked as she stared out the window.

"I asked Gertrude about that. They were trying to find out why Earthmen are immune to their plague virus."

He paused and decided he'd better tell her a lie.

"They're good biologists," he went on. "They wanted to synthesize a living Martian female on the mamalian principle. They can build robot animals like that. They wanted to see if she'd be immune to the plague."

Jerry wondered how she'd react if he told her the *truth*. That it wasn't going to be a Martian female—but

an Earth female, furnished with Martian genes. That in very fact—it was going to be Betty. She wouldn't like the idea of mothering a lot of little Martian boys—she wouldn't like it even in the retrospect world of possibilities bypassed.

She was still gazing out the window. "I feel sorry for them, Jerry—in a way."

He watched her silently.

"Millions of women—and just two men," she murmured.

"See what could happen?" he said. "If you stay in mourning too long? And a plague descends? How'd you like to share a husband with that many."

She stood up quickly and reddened. "I'm going now, Jerry," she said nervously. "I'm going away and be—well—anyway, don't try to see me . . ."

She moved toward the door, paused, and looked back. "...for a couple of months, anyway." She hurried out quickly. The back of her neck was bright pink.

He settled back with a grin and listened to the sound of the rain that was beginning to fall outside. Two months? The dry, dry desert had waited ten long years.

THE END

IT'S A LIE!



By A. MORRIS



A REPUTABLE scientific investigator has made a thorough, sincere effort to trace down the source of a score of rumors which have plagued us for many years. Undoubtedly you've heard some of them too. Most of them go something like this: "Say, Joe, they've got a carburetor in Detroit which will give fifty miles to the gallon—but they're not releasing it. My buddy heard about it and he works in

the Blank Car Factory." Or, "—they've got an electric light bulb that'll last forever, but they're naturally not going to spoil their market."

You've heard the stories or variations on them. They sound good, and sometimes when you're mad at the big companies you're tempted to believe them. But they "just ain't so".

The investigator tracking them down

hasn't been able to get at a source. Probably they stem from wishful thinking coupled with momentary anger with a company. They sound good of course, and they're easy to pass on. But they're just not true. Most companies are making sincere honest efforts through research to extend the life and services of the products which they sell. The super inventions don't exist and if they did the big companies would be as anxious as we are to get them on the market.

Naturally you can't white-wash the companies altogether. They've pulled some fast ones in their day too. There is the sad

story of tungsten carbide tools, and monopolies in a number of other fields, monopolies which have hurt the consumer. But these are things of the past and you can be sure that anti-trust investigators have pretty well eliminated the opportunities for such chicanery on the part of industrialists.

When the big new inventions come along, we get 'em. After all companies are in business to sell things. Just file away that "fifty miles to the gallon carburetor" and the "life-time razor blade" and forget 'em. It's the big lies you've got to beware of...

TIME TRAVEL ATOMS



By PETE BOGG



SCIENCE HAS plopped into the hand of the geologist, the historian and the anthropologist, one of the most important tools these worthies could use. It is an accurate clock, definitely dating events with astounding accuracy, something which these scientists have needed for a long, long time. As of now this device hasn't been fully accepted and its value completely agreed upon, but within a short while its use is expected to be confirmed.

The clock is essentially an electronic device for measuring the amount of carbon fourteen in any substance. Carbon fourteen is an isotope, a radioactive which is found in all organic matter, living or dead. It has a half-life of five thousand five hundred and sixty-eight years. By measuring the degree of activity of an organic specimen, the amount of carbon fourteen present can be determined and the resultant accurate age of the specimen noted.

Already the instrument has led to some interesting conclusions. Many substances removed from the caves of our ancient ancestors have been examined and their age estimated with the new method. It checks perfectly with the older methods of determining age. This tends to indicate the validity of the instrument's use.

But by no means are the answers always the same, which leads of course to the interesting aspects of the thing. Geologists for example have always believed that the Great Ice Cap extended over the North American Continent some twenty-five thousand years ago. Carbon fourteen determination indicates that this figure should be cut right in half! The Cap existed only about twelve thousand years ago!

Human beings first invaded the North

American shore about nine thousand years ago the instrument points out, though there is also evidence that our cave-man progenitors dropped in from Asia or the Pacific islands as early as a couple of thousand years after the ice-cap receded.

Another five thousand years went by before the cave-men traveled from the Pacific to the Atlantic shores. What caused this delay is not known though it is suspected that possibly a great drouth may have been the cause, setting up an effective barrier.

From archeological burying grounds near Mexico City the remains of mammoths and horse-like animals have been examined and their ages determined as about sixteen thousand years. The sabre-toothed tiger was apparently a contemporary of ancient man according to an examination of remains found in caves in Nevada. Perhaps the extinction of the tiger occurred later than we previously thought.

The mighty civilization of ancient Egypt was merely a simple agrarian community six thousand years ago as evidenced by an examination of grains found in Egypt in primitive burial grounds.

These fascinating facts about ancient man and his civilizations will be extended and added to as the atomic time clock becomes accepted and in more general use. It provides us with an absolutely accurate clock able to go back more than twenty-five thousand years. This is particularly important because we know more about the period before Man's arrival on this Earth than we do about twenty-five to fifty-thousand years he has been here. The atomic clock is going to provide plenty of interesting answers!



The Reader's FORUM



WE SURE GET AROUND!

Dear Editors:

More than seven years ago, while living in Japanese-occupied Bandung in the Dutch East Indies, I became acquainted with **AMAZING STORIES AND FANTASTIC ADVENTURES**: my fiction-hungry reader's mind immediately fell in love with such characters as Adam & Eve Link, John Carter, Warlord of Mars, Dejah Thoris, his beautiful wife, and all the other lovable personalities encountered between the paper covers of your superb magazines.

Then I was evacuated and went to live in Holland; my precious copies of AS and FA I had to leave behind. For the next few years I was very busy studying at the Netherlands college for Foreign Service from which I graduated a month ago. Then at last I could find leisure to take up again my favorite reading of science-fiction and fantastic stories. I ran across a fine specimen one day, called "The Green Splotches" by T. S. Stribling, in "The Pocket Book of Science Fiction". Wondering, I looked up the acknowledgments section of the book and found:

"Ziff-Davis Publishing Company. The story **THE GREEN SPLOTCHES**, by T. S. Stribling. Reprinted by courtesy of **AMAZING STORIES**"

Imagine my surprise upon "rediscovering" your magazine!

So I grabbed the old typewriter and started this letter to ask you the following:

Could you spare an old fan...eh...well, eh...if you happen to have a few old copies lying around someplace...eh, free ones, you know...would you, will you wrap them up and send them to yours truly? Aw c'mon, editors, have a heart!

I am especially anxious to see again some of my old favorites, featuring stories by Edgar Rice Burroughs. The best stories I can still remember were "The Giant of Mars" and other John Carter tales; the Adam Link stories; "Enchantress of Lemuria"; a story, called (I am not certain though) "The Time Chain". Are Krupa, Fuqua and Allan St. John still among your artists? I think their illustrations were tops!

F. Paul Engel
Reggstraat 1-I
Amsterdam, Holland

If you've not done your good deed for the month, readers, here's your chance. Letting down a fellow fan is conduct unbecoming a science-fiction reader! —Ed.

AND SHE HAS TIME TO READ!

Well Ed:

I guess 'tis time I had my say. I am getting a very large thrill out of the way the radio and movies are putting the future across. I heard a very good story on the radio the other night, by Ray Bradbury, I believe. Now there's a movie at the State here called, "Destination Moon". But I still wonder if it will wake up the few thousand people who still think that the earth is the only planet with life and that no one will ever go elsewhere and come back alive. My husband comes high on that list. I have been reading everything on the subject that I could find since I was eleven years old. So I have been a fan for fourteen years. My four oldest children fight to listen to that type story. The boys, age 9-7-6, went to see the movie I mentioned, this morning. I intend to go tonight, if I can find a baby-sitter with a suit of armor. They need it when sitting with my seven. I'm hoping to see my letter in your mag next month.

Mrs. Harriet Wright
6 Monument St.
Portland, Maine

Now that science-fiction has begun to take on, in the average citizen's mind, an air of adulthood, book publishers, motion-picture producers and quality magazine editors are "discovering" the field with astonishment and delight. What do they think we've been trying to tell them for the past twenty years? —Ed.

ONE READER'S OPINION

Dear Editor:

First of all, hurrah! You've put some of those short-short stories back. I was be-

ginning to think they were gone for good. Perhaps to satisfy both those who want facts and those who want stories you ought to arrive at a compromise—50% stories, 50% facts.

At the same time, I would like to suggest that in those short articles you ought to incorporate a "Biography of the Author". Perhaps every month a biography of one of the authors whose work appears in the issue. On glancing through "The Observatory" I saw you gave short biographies of Rog Phillips and Robert Moore Williams. If you had a "Biography of the Author" section you could continue with that practice.

The issue was rather good. Probably I'll be outvoted 9000 to 1, but here's how I list the stories:

1st place: **THE COUNTRY BEYOND THE CURVE**. The writing itself was only fair to good, but the idea was excellent. What's even better, the illustration actually illustrated the story.

Tie for second place: **WEAPON FROM THE STARS** and **GATEWAY TO GLORY**.

In **WEAPON FROM THE STARS** the story was good, the idea unusual, but the title—phew!

GATEWAY TO GLORY—at last! An unusual plot. It was excellent. Even better than Rog Phillips. Good title.

4th place: **MR. LAHR SAYS HIS PRAYERS**. The title was a bit confusing.

5th place: **SEVEN CAME BACK**. The only reason this is in fifth place is because the others were so excellent. In another issue it would have been 2nd or even first.

6th place: **REPAIR JOB**. The only just "fair-to-middling" story in the whole issue.

Altogether it was an excellent issue. The stories were, as a whole, above average.

Before I sign off, the front cover illustration doesn't illustrate a scene from **WEAPON FROM THE STARS**. The only thing it has in common with the story is the steel beam. Also, why do so many of the cover girls wear their hair parted in the middle and falling over the side of the face like that? They'd look better in sensible hairdos.

Arline Gingold
P. O. Box 295
Woodridge, N. Y.

Gene Freeman
Compton, Cal.

We asked two of our artists why they stuck to the type of hair-do you mention. Both said almost identically the same thing: it's the most truly feminine way a woman can wear her hair. Maybe they're right; we're strictly a space-ship admirer ourselves!

—Ed.

THAT'S TELLING 'EM!

Dear Mr. Browne:

This being the first letter I've ever written to any type of publication, I would naturally like to see it in print, mainly

because I'm curious as to whether you print letters from anyone that has an intelligent topic to discuss.

My principal objective of this letter was to question certain readers upon the value of criticism which I feel is unnecessary. One such example is the continuous gripe certain characters have about the validity of fact expressed in science fiction stories which appear in your magazines. If they want fact instead of entertainment they should stick to encyclopedias. I expect that will raise a yell. "You can stick to fact in a story and still have it entertaining." True, but the slight deviations which I notice (I see 'em too) should not cause these yokels' blood pressure to go up as it seems to. I noticed an article in one of our large metropolitan newspapers saying that several instructors at Caltech University wrote sf. I doubt if those CC's (constant critics) even got through high school.

The next point I would like to bring up concerns your artwork. Of the approximately 15 different fantasy and science fiction magazines and booklets I read, yours has by far the best covers, and by far the worst inside artwork. This I can't understand. You can pick up almost any pulp magazine of any type and find the same class of artwork on the inside. But your covers are truly works of art, and the artists should be congratulated. (Although the gal on the Oct. issue had a double chin.) Also, I've been reading a lot of noise about whether or not the women in your illustrations should wear clothes. In my humble opinion, if the girls in the stories wear clothes then the women in the artwork should. If the women in story in the scene illustrated are stark naked, so should the gals in the pictures. That should be fair enough to both sexes. If certain of your women readers are embarrassed when their friends see certain illustrations, I hope they don't let their friends read "Toffee" or stories by Shaver.

I would like to end this by saying how much I enjoy both your magazines and hope you keep up your steady improvement. (Ray Palmer's doing some good work too.) I feel like a mediator trying to stop wars when I mention other people's criticisms.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD COVER?

Dear Sirs:

I have just finished reading the Forum for September and I find myself agreeing with most of the views expressed there, Mrs. Neuman in particular. I, too, feel like hiding the lurid cover of the magazine while walking down the street. I have been asked point blank why I read such trash. People get the impression that the inside is of the same quality as the outside. They judge the book by its cover. Many professional and scientific people read sf and enjoy it, but there are many

more who have never opened the cover of one and yet condemn it as pulp paper trash.

Mrs. Neuman's reference to ASTOUNDING is quite true but not complete. It is the only sf book readily available at most newsstands. The majority of the stands won't handle any pulp paper at all. I worked at one and the boss' attitude was that he would not clutter up his store with that trash with the lurid covers. ASTOUNDING, on the other hand, is quite acceptable. My frank opinion is that I get more for my money with AS and FA.

I also think that Rocky Stone's articles on the pyramids have been one of the worst space fillers you ever published. I can't think of any other reason for your putting it in. Tell me, is this also the forerunner of a book that reveals all and that article a teaser? If it is, I prophesy he won't sell many.

As for the lack of new ideas, I feel sorry for the writers. The public is never satisfied. The sf writers aren't the only ones suffering from that. Other fields are even worse. I haven't bought a popular magazine in weeks or months because there are only so many ways a boy can meet a girl and I've seen them all.

This may seem sort of a complaining letter, but you notice I have not mentioned anything about not liking the stories I read on the inside of the magazine. Those, I can't complain about and as long as the complaints are limited to the cover or the shorts at the end of the stories, the circulation won't have a slump.

Good luck with your writers, and keep up the good work. Oh yes, one more thing, can you give me the name of the fan club nearest me?

Maryanne Yeisu
1522 Francisco St.
Berkeley 3, Cal.

Perhaps no cover in the history of AMAZING STORIES brought in so much praise and appreciation as did last month's (December). Because of that, and because a large percentage of our readers have asked (demanded would be more accurate) for more interplanetary covers, we've arranged to have several painted. You'll be seeing them during the next few months.

—Ed.

YOU CAN'T KID STAN!

Dear Ed:

A recent radio program devoted about ten minutes to a person who made a speech about the "Flying Saucers". His main idea was that they are U. S. inventions. Now who's he trying to kid? Only a low-grade moron could have dreamed that up, and it would take a still lower-grade moron to swallow it. What does he think of the public? Anybody who has been kept up to date on the "Saucers" would know that he was way off the beam, and if any of your

readers believe this stuff about them being "ours" then I would like them to answer a few questions.

1. If it is true that the "Flying Saucers" are made here on earth, in the U. S., why is the Air Force endangering the lives of many people by testing them over large-populated areas?

2. Would the U. S., or any other country for that matter, take the risk of having one crash in another country and having their secret fall into that country's hands?

3. Why, if they are ours, does the government endanger Air Force pilots and planes by chasing them? (Already there has been one pilot killed, and possibly many others, while chasing the saucers. Capt. Thomas Mantell was killed in the skies south of Ft. Knox on January 7, 1948 at 3:20. His plane disintegrated in midair from no known cause.)

4. Why is it that before airlift was achieved, that strange objects were seen streaking through the skies?

That's my whole case and I only come to one conclusion, that the "Flying Saucers" are space ships from another planet or system. Of course, there may be another more simple explanation, but after weighing the facts, that is the only conclusion I can come to.

I hope that you will not think me disrespectful, for many older persons are much better qualified and know more about it than I, for I am only 15 years old, but ever since I heard that radio program I felt the need to do this and now I feel better. Do what you will to this letter, but I'm glad I wrote it.

Stan Holman
326 Cleveland Ave.
Trenton, New Jersey

We're glad you wrote it, too. Now if some of these "experts" will only supply the answers...

—Ed.

ANY FANS IN SPRINGFIELD, MASS.?

Dear Editor,

It is my wish to get together with fans in the Springfield area and maybe organize a fan club. Now the main difficulty is the finding of fans. It seems the fans here are the strong, silent type. Let's hope they're strong on getting acquainted, along with the silent. Would any and all fans near here get in touch with me?

I would greatly appreciate it if you would publish this letter as it is the only way I can find the non-writing fans.

Charles Baird
161 Albemarle St.
Springfield, Mass.

WHERE THE MOVIES SLIPPED

Dear Sir:

You said that Wylie and Balmer's **WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE** was being

filmed, and that it would be a good picture. I read the story twelve times, and thrilled to the action every time. I saw another space picture tonight which had been billed in one of our leading theaters as superb. I want to list some of the mistakes so that they won't happen again.

A chemist and physicist had an argument which was decidedly one-sided, while they were collaborating on some emergency fuel equations.

This same physicist identified, positively, some minerals by their colors alone.

Mars was a perfect circle, and neither of its moons was shown.

Earth had no atmosphere, and the continental outlines were sharp and clear.

The N and S poles of earth were in vertical position, but the milky way was almost vertical too.

Too many of the meteors were the same size and shape, and were grouped in threes, each one touching the other two. They also made a sound like a locomotive as they passed.

They were not even uncomfortable when the ship, fuel-less, hit the atmosphere at top speed. They were not affected, but the equipment was, when they hit the space where gravities oppose.

They were within Mars' orbit, but said they were in outer space. Light is stopped by opaque bodies, and the sun will only assume apparent star size when it is many light year distances.

The stars shown brightly around the moon.

In space, moving at incredible speed, the ship sounded like a wind storm when it accelerated.

Palomar reported the ship as moving at incredible speed past the moon. Where did they get such magnification?

A damned violin sounded like a saw, just as it does in almost every space picture.

If you can bring pressure, I hope that you will get the producers to make an "A" picture out of my favorite story, **WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE**.

Henry Andrews
1007 Piedmont Rd.
Charleston, W. Va.

ARE PEOPLE CHARACTERS?

Dear Mr. Browne:

Mrs. Richard Phillips (Sept. Letter of the Month) has a point there. Let's have more "people" and fewer "characters"—it can be done. I enjoyed **THE UNEXPECTED WEAPON** and **THIS WAY OUT** very much—the latter had some excellent elements of surprise.

Covers could stand to come closer to Astounding SF's good productions and, as the lady implies, it would even help sell more copies (to those who'd like to read the contents but don't want to be labeled as readers of trash by the slightly garish covers).

More fan letters and fewer shorts—perhaps one long fact article instead of sev-

eral short ones.

Ellen Kahn
3946 Legation St., N. W.
Washington 15, D. C.

Last month's cover—and this month's, for that matter—is what we hope readers had in mind when requesting more truly representative of science fiction. Either way, we know they'll tell us! —Ed.

PLEA FROM "DOWN UNDER"

Dear Sir:

I have been a reader of **AMAZING STORIES** since the first issue, way back in 1926. I have read the magazine regularly from 1926 onto the beginning of the war. During the war of course, I could not get the magazine, but I expected it would become available when the war ended. I found that not only were the book stores no longer importing **AMAZING STORIES** but due to the dollar position I could not take out a subscription. So in view of all the above, I hope you—Mr. Editor and your readers—will forgive me for a request I am about to make. I do not like to ask for charity, but my love for **AMAZING** is greater than my pride, so I wonder if any **AMAZING** readers who have spare copies they do not want would be kind to send them to me.

There is one science-fiction magazine published in Australia and I will be glad to forward copies in exchange.

Wishing **AMAZING STORIES** all the best,

R. H. Harding
38 Central Ave.
Maylands,
Western Australia

YOUR HEALTH, MR. DANIELS!

Dear Editor:

I personally do not care if you go 'sick' or still stay in the pulp, and I probably wouldn't even care if you sent out **AMAZING** on papyrus, just as long as you kept sending it out.

I have been reading **AMAZING** since its inception and even your 'bad' stories are good; sure, over this period of years I have developed a fondness for certain of your writers, which only proves I'm human, but the others are just as good and I figure that you know more about the public wants than I do or you wouldn't be there.

From a purely selfish point of view, the only thing I wish you could do would come out daily—it's so long to wait a whole month to get another copy.

It is probably needless of me to wish you the best of luck, because as long as there are people like you to publish **AMAZING**, there will be people like me who will buy it.

Glen W. Daniels
General Delivery
Capitola, California

ARMOR PUNCHER



By JON BARRY



THE KOREAN incident has heightened an aspect of modern warfare which is apparently the eternal conflict—the battle between the weapon-maker and the armorer. Ever since the first man protected himself with a shield of animal hide against the rocks thrown by his neighbors, armor versus weapons, have inspired some amazing inventions.

The earliest bronze armors would stop the swords and arrows of the day and in medieval times some of the fine steel armors would stop almost any weapon available. The coming of gunpowder outmoded the armor and relegated it to the junkyard. A musket-ball simply couldn't be stopped and with the coming of the rifled gun, any armor was just so much junk.

The first World War saw the introduction of the steel helmet primarily as a protection against flying debris and spent shrapnel, although some body armor was tried experimentally as a guard against these same materials and against bullets whose range was almost exhausted. The Second World War saw the retention of the steel helmet by all combatants and the last few years of it saw the introduction of a modified body armor for tankmen and flyers, proof against small slivers of metal.

But personal armor is undoubtedly a matter for the record. It is doubtful if we shall ever see it again save in the form of lead plates proof against the minute devastation of atomic particles. But the armor of vehicles, tanks and armored cars is another matter. This development follows directly from naval armor and in some respects passes it.

The armor used on tanks varies from an inch to ten or twelve inches in spots and is resistant to amazingly severe blows. We learn from Korea that Russian tanks are capable of stopping one hundred and five millimeter projectiles! How is this possible?

In the first place the theory of armor employs two major principles. First, it should be so designed as to take the shocking blow of a projectile at an angle in order that it may glance off exerting the minimum forces on the armor. This is about the oldest principle in armor making so why you see tanks armored with flat slabs at peculiar angles rather than smooth but it is perpetually useful. It is the streamlined shapes. It is hard for projectile to get a "foothold" in such a material.

The second principle in armor making—and even more important—is metallurgical. An armor must be above all, tough. Not hard especially—but tough. If it's too hard, it may crack. If it's tough it can resist incredible stresses. Of course a

certain amount of hardness—particularly on the outer skin of the armor is necessary to resist the penetration of the projectile.

So much for the armor-makers. What about the "armor-punchers"?

They have made shells with even greater velocities for one thing. That, in fact, has been the standard approach to punching holes in armor. These high speed, hard-tipped projectiles knife their way into the armor no matter how tough it is. Within limits of course.

But there is another technique of punching armor which is gaining great favor and which will probably be standard for the future. It involves the use of what is called the "shaped charge". The armor piercing projectile is simply an ordinary shell of metal filled with high explosive—and with a hollow conical shape within the explosive.

This cone of empty space has the property of reflecting or focusing the entire effect of the explosive charge into a narrow area at the nose of the shell. Thus when it hits the armor, it sends a column of furiously hot, enormously high-pressured gases, into a straight line into the armor! It is as if one had a needle beam of heat energy and lanced right into the armor. So effective is this hollow charge (invented by an American incidentally back in the nineteenth century) that Korean experience has shown that it will punch a hole two inches in diameter in eleven inch hardened steel armor! And this when fired in the form of a low velocity three and a half inch bazooka projectile!

Furthermore when the hole has been cut in the armor (this is all happening in a few hundredths of a second) a hot stream of incandescent gas and molten metal is flung in the space behind the armor. The tank crew is given the chance to play with a stream of this type!

The necessity of using armored vehicles and projectiles to combat them is now established. The future will undoubtedly see enormous advances in both the art of armor-making and armor-punching, but it is always the armor-puncher who will have the ultimate advantage. If the time ever comes when rocket warfare begins in earnest, we will see these same principles employed on a vaster scale—but they will still be the same principles. An understanding of armor-techniques may also have something to do with developing meteoric shields for space flight. If nothing else, out of this study of armor principle also comes the knowledge of metals and metallurgy, so necessary to the development of modern science, particularly the science of rocketry!



SCIENCE TEAM

By L. A. BURT

ANYONE WITH a mathematical turn of mind—and there are many among the readers of fantasy and science fiction—would appreciate the famous works of the Liebers. The Liebers are a man and wife team at the University Of New York who have been producing steadily for the last ten years a series of books on mathematics of the extremely readable type, popularizations of the first order.

First of all, the Liebers have a particular interest in the work of Evariste Galois, a genius of the first rank who died when he was twenty-one in a duel inspired by political foes. But before he died he left a mathematical monument summarized in a few pages written the night before he was killed. This meteoric figure has been seized upon by the Liebers and made the basis of their Galois society which evaluates the early genius's work. The Lieber produced a series of books ranging from Galois's *Theory of Groups*, through non-Euclidean geometry to Relativity. All of these books are written in a peculiar verse (blank) style which adds rather than detracts from their interest.

All of the books are profusely illustrated with line drawings of a particularly naive but captivating type. The subject of each drawing is generally a mathematical symbol, humanized, and done with a fantastic touch that leaves the reader charmed. As far as the meaty matter of each book goes, it is sound and thorough. But it is couched in such clever and fascinating ways that one learns in spite of one's self.

The popularization of Relativity is not of the usual kind. Most often, writers on relativity, feel that the reader is unable to take much less like mathematics. Hence, they leave it out—but not the Liebers. Their book on relativity is laden with math all lavishly explained and clearly discussed. They don't leave you groping around with the request of analogies. They force you to think in mathematical terms—but as strongly as you'd be forced to take out that beautiful red head across the street! From every standpoint, their books are little literary and mathematical masterpieces.

Their works on non-Euclidean geometry which lies at the foundation of the new world picture and without which relativity would not have been conceived, are prizes. The drawings picture clearly the never-never land of Minkowski and Riemann as well as the solid country of Euclid and by suggestion they say, "but is our world Euclidean?" and you know it is not.

For a rich and entertaining experience delve into the Lieber's work. It can be easily ventured that more than one science fiction writer has gotten a good idea from them.

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FANZINE business is rather slack this month, with fans getting ready to attend the Norwescan—which will be past history when this reaches the stands. I'm winding things up for the trip to Portland myself.

Just a year ago I was getting ready to attend the Convention, my first fan convention. I had never been to Cincinnati before. But I've been in Portland, Oregon, many times, and know some of the people who will be there, as Portlanders. Others I will meet for the first time, and I'm looking forward to making many new friends.

The war going on—someone called it World War 2 1/2—is making itself felt. The world is knit so closely today that events in one part of the world throw their shadow all over. For example, plans of publishers must now take into account possibility of future war curtailments. *Amazing* was to have gone slick, and now it will in all probability have to remain pulp, because the change to slick paper would be risky. It will hit a lot of the new magazines on the stands too, because they will have to fold for lack of paper if things get worse. It's too bad. They were giving stf a real boost.

War has a habit of making the most fantastic "inventions" of science fiction become the commonplace of reality. Modern aviation is far more fantastic than any stf of the last century could have pictured. I think it was Barney Oldfield who once announced with firm conviction that the top speed for a human being in any kind of conveyance would be sixty miles an hour because at a greater speed all the air would be sucked out of his lungs.

When bakelite was first being used in radios there was considerable amusement over the fact that if our civilization ended and some future one discovered a piece of bakelite they might be able to analyze its elements but would never be able to find the secret of making it. Well, we now have a motor that future generations would never know was a motor because it can't even work unless it's going faster than any surface machine can go. It's one of the several jet motors and is called a "stove-pipe".

There are probably plenty of such devices that a strange civilization could never

reproduce. Modern steel alloys, for example. There are alloys of steel that behave one way when tempered one way, and another when tempered another way. One alloy, for example, is extremely brittle when tempered, and able to shatter like glass. Untempered it is one of the toughest metals there is, able to be twisted like taffy without breaking. It's used in cars. The part is machined to proper size and shape, then placed in a vhf coil which heats the top half dozen atomic layers white hot while the metal a hundredth of an inch under the surface is still cold. In that state it's tempered so that it has a very hard wearing surface, hard as glass, while all except that surface is untempered and tough.

Science fiction stories have been written using the theme of machines that would be completely undecipherable to anyone who doesn't know what they are. Eventually perhaps all machines will be that way. They will grow utterly simple and utterly incomprehensible except to an expert, all at the same time. A finger twisting a dial, the very warmth of the presence of a hand, will control mechanical and electrical operations so complex that the user has no more comprehension of what goes on than an uneducated farmer has of what actually goes on in detail from the time he drops a seed in the ground until he harvests a handful of seeds that it produces.

AND THAT is a theme that isn't used to full advantage in science fiction—mainly because it takes too much original thinking. I read a stf story once that impressed me very much, although I can't remember the title or where I read it. In that story the people had space ships in which they went to uninhabited planets. When they got there they took their ships apart and reassembled them as tractors, houses, bridges, road building equipment, etc., every part going into the construction of the ship being designed to be a part of another machine to be used to carve out a habitable space on an alien world. That would take some real designing! But it's a good idea.

It belongs to the largely neglected field of stf. A scientific world is based on two aspects of mechanics, scientific principles,

and design. A car, basically, is one percent principles and 99% designing. Most of the real progress in utilization of science for the average man in the next century will be in design rather than discovery. Inventions. Improvements of existing inventions. The evolution of the electronic circuit from heavy wires in large cabinets to metallic lines drawn on plastic sheets is an indicative trend.

Underlying this trend will be what I like to consider as a sort of judo technique applied to science and mechanics. In judo you don't break a man's arm by your own strength, but by directing his own momentum in such a way that he breaks his own arm. In science there will be more of that. No generating great energies as in the past in giant steam plants, but directing existing energies of minute quantities by little tricks of design and construction so that they do great things.

For example, the atmosphere around us is a mixture of atmospheres of varying temperatures from below zero to maybe five hundred degrees, all mixed together. The time may come when a practically energy-less means will be discovered to separate these different temperatures. Air in a cold room will go through such a device, and all gas molecules with temperatures over fifty will be directed back into the room, while those below that will be shot out into the winter air. Then a house will be kept comfortably warm without

consumption of much energy and without generation of heat. And in the summer a house will be kept comfortably cool by separating the hot molecules from the cold in the same device, using perhaps no more energy than it takes to run a small electric fan.

Now we come to the fanzine reviews for this month. There aren't as many as usual, mainly because a lot of the fan editors are preparing larger issues for the Norwescon. As I write this it's getting very close to Labor Day, though you won't be reading this until a month or two after that.

I will have been to Portland and the Norwescon. Perhaps you who are reading this are one whom I met there for the first time. That is one of the things I like best about writing stories—the friends I make through it. Of course, I probably lost a few friends from *Weapon From the Stars* which, I'm told, turned out to be a bum story. But my trip to the Norwescon will be a much needed vacation that will give my sagging brain cells new life—I hope! Anyway, if you get tired of reading my stuff why don't you subscribe to one or more of the fanzines reviewed here and get some really enjoyable fan writing?

JOURNAL OF SPACE FLIGHT: June 1950, the Chicago Rocket Society; 25c; Wayne Proell, 10630 S. St. Louis Ave., Chicago 43, Ill. An announcement came

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with this issue that there is no summer publication, the first fall issue coming in September. Feature article in the June issue is the setting up of the factors for an Earth-Moon rocket orbit, by Michael Conley, who actually goes into the problem and arrives at specific solutions. The flight time for the round trip according to his figures would be 55 hours 51 minutes 46 seconds.

In rocketry abstracts, brief items of interest to rocket fans in this from P. Sears Natural History: An extended meteor observation program is reported which indicates that the atmosphere on the moon is about .1mm and that due to low gravity this atmosphere extends far out into space and at about fifty miles is about as dense as the earth's atmosphere at the same distance.

The June issue also contains the best discussion of flying saucers I've read to date. Listen to this: The velocities observed have been from nearly stationary to...in excess of 3000 mph where they were tracked with instruments at White Sands.

BEM: 10c; Sept.: John R. Kalas, 146 Ridgewood St. S. E., Grand Rapids 8, Mich. Something that might interest you in this issue is a list of stf authors and their pen names. They list only six for me. Tak tak. There's also an article analyzing Dianetics. For myself I would be very interested in having listed the new advances, if any, accomplished by Dianetics over findings of other psychological works. I may be mistaken, but it seems to me the big fault of non-Aristotelian logic as expounded by Alfred Korzybski is also contained in Dianetics: that it is advanced as something totally new and utterly remarkable, and presented with such involved techniques that the whole would have to be studied for months to discover if its exponent had discovered anything new, and what. I admire both Alfred Korzybski and L. Ron Hubbard for one thing though—they have made a serious mental flight toward "superman", both of them starting with the premise that "superman" lies within each of us, and only awaits self discovery. With that I heartily agree.

FANTASY-TIMES: 10c, 12/31.00; James V. Taurasi, 137-03 32nd Ave., Flushing, L. I., N. Y.. The top newsmagazine of fandom. Would you like to learn of each new stf magazine, movie, and radio program as it appears, and keep informed of what most of them contain? Then subscribe to this fanzine, because it does a very creditable job.

It has headlines such as "Damon Knight leaves Super Science to edit new stf magazine." "British Editions of Amazing and Fantastic Adventures are out." By the way, I notice that the latest Japanese Edition of Amazing Stories has a story of mine in it.

As I've said before, I'm not going to tell you the news that F-T gathers. You'll have to get it to get the news it gathers, and

you should if you consider yourself a fan.

ODD: 10c; bi-monthly; Duggie Fisher Jr., 1302 Lester Street, Poplar Bluff, Mo. The Aug.-Sept. issue is a definite improvement over the last issue. In its editorial page Duggie gives thanks to those who helped him with putting out the issue, concluding with the remark that he thanks his little sister, without whose help he would have gotten it out two weeks sooner. Why Duggie. Them's unkind words. Or are they? Maybe he means he enjoys his little sister more than putting out a fanzine. But that's heresy! Anyway, Duggie calls me a big wheel in stf, so I'm on his side. Maybe if his little sister writes me a letter calling me a big wheel I'll change sides. I like being called a big wheel.

Most humorous bit in this issue is a drawing entitled "Miss National Geographic of 1950", by Ray Nelson. There's a large letter section. Most interesting item is "Small Town Stuff."

FANTASY FOTOS: not a fanzine, but a collection of nice fotos that any fan will enjoy having for his den. They sent me seventeen of them. Best thing for you to do is send for their mimeographed list of prices which seem to me to be very reasonable for the high quality work. Fantasy Fotos, 579 Bridgeway Blvd., Sausalito, Calif.. I understand they're putting out a photo of me too in the near future.

FANTASY ADVERTISER: March 1950—how'd that get in my pile for review? On slick paper by photo-offset that reduces to small size while having as much contents per page as large size. If you are interested in selling, trading, or buying back issues, books, etc., you can get what you want in this zine. Roy A. Squires, 1745 Kenneth Road, Glendale, California. I remember now—I complained about the name of the editor not being in previous issues. Roy is an electronics engineer, currently engaged in guided missile research.

SPACESHIP: no. 9; 5c, 6/25c; Bob Silverberg and Saul Diskin, 760 Montgomery St., Brooklyn 13, N.Y.. Part 2 of "On a Silver Platter" by August Argyle is rather long, taking up most of the issue this time. "Cancelled", a dianetic fantasy by Saul Diskin is quite cute.

Bob and Saul are what I consider real fans. They don't attempt to be professional in their printing job, but just to put out something they enjoy and hope the readers will. I enjoy it, and I think you will too. Send for it.

CATAclysm: 10c; Del Close and Robert Briney, and I'm sorry to say there's no address given in the zine. It was probably on the envelope, which I don't have. Too bad, and I'll correct that as soon as I hear from them after they read this.

Bob Briney wrote a nice review for his zine, too. It's:

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INCINERATIONS: 10c The Grape Press, 9109 SW Oleson Road, Portland 19, Oregon. Lots of good humor in this issue. I had quite a few chuckles. Especially the compliment-insult to Juanita Sharp, secretary of the Norwescon which congratulates her for staying in office "under conditions that would have caused any intelligent person to resign." In the same spirit is an article, "Seance and Unsanity", by Leconte Oiseau, "an introduction to non-intelligent systems and general chaos."

QUANDARY: no. 2, Sept-Oct.; 10c, printed at the Sign of the Empty Wallet by Lee Hoffman, 101 Wagner St., Savannah, Georgia. In "Chaos" the editorial it says, "How do you like the paper we use? It's the cheapest we could get." Actually it's a good paper and takes mimeeing without run through. The art work is very good. There's an excellent fan short story entitled "A Martian Oddity", by Stanley Wiedbottom and Joe Kennedy. The rest of the twenty pages are full of interesting fan writing. You'll not only enjoy it, but maybe you'll want to contribute to its pages.

SCIENCE AND SCIENCE FANTASY FICTION REVIEW: official organ of the American Science-Fantasy Society; edited by Calvin Thos. Beck, P.O. Box 877, Grand Central Station, New York 17, N.Y.; 15c. No art work, but plenty of reading. This fan group seems very interested in getting local groups formed all over the country, so if you want to have a fan club in your city and there isn't one, write to Mr. Beck. Maybe he can help you get started.

SCIENCEFICTION NEWS LETTER: 10c; Bob Tucker, Box 260, Bloomington, Illinois, with William Rotsler as staff artist and Redd Loggs as co-editor, making it a very excellent fanzine. Bob Tucker himself is a well known author and fan. This newszine stresses people rather than events and pro activities. If you want to know what the people in the limelight of sf are doing, you can get the news here.

Enclosed with the current issue is the announcement of the new policy of charging for this zine that has been distributed free up to now. Since it tells far better than I could what it wants to say I'm reproducing it here:

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These past sixteen issues of SCIENCE FICTION NEWS LETTER have come to you free of charge while the paper was slowly growing, slowly finding the rut the editor desired to wallow in for awhile. And of course, the cost of publishing each issue has not-so-slowly mounted—roughly fifty dollars is required to print and mail an eight-page issue.

So, after sixteen issues, we're asking for a bit of assistance in meeting the printing bill.

Single copy price is ten cents; the next 3 issues for twenty-five cents, or six issues for fifty cents. Please do not remit more than 50c, for we hesitate to assume more than a one-year obligation. (Overseas readers free of charge—merely continue writing once in awhile.)

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FACTS OF THE FUTURE

By LYNN STANDISH

ONCE UPON A TIME...

IF YOU want to be driven daffy, just stroll by the passenger observation dome of a space freighter, wearing a communication officer's uniform. I guarantee you'll blow your stack in twenty minutes. I know. I've done it often enough.

I've been a deep-spacer for almost fifteen years, all of it as a communications man, but it's only in the last ten of those years since space travel has become commonplace, that I've really gotten my dander up. I should be philosophical by now, but I guess I'll never be. I haven't the temperament.

"Ooh Captain!" some beautiful young thing'll say sweetly, staring straight at my communications' insignia, "what's that big star over there?" She'll be pointing straight to one of the Jovian satellites!



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I don't know how I answer them. I'm afraid to think about it even though Company policy is pretty well drilled into me.

Or I'll walk down the observation lounges and I'll overhear a typical conversation.

A couple of newlyweds will be honeymooning and they'll be snuggled up close to each other.

"John," she'll say lilytingly, "I'm thrilled! Isn't it wonderful? Just think! We're skillions of miles from nowhere. Oh John, what if something happens!" Invariably she'll end this last on just the right fearful note.

The husband will give his wife a nice manly smile. "Don't worry darling. This isn't anything. We're as safe as a couple of bugs in a rug." He'll squeeze her a little tighter. Then he'll say: "You shouldn't be frightened. There isn't even a thrill left. This is like commuting on the Long Island Monorail. These atomics aren't even real spaceships. Just a few years ago there were real deepspacers. Those were the good old days when space travel was an adventure. Today a spaceman is as rare as a trolley motorman!"

No, I don't strangle 'em. I'd like to though. "No thrills left!" I could tell him a thing or two as he stands so comfortably in this palatial steel shell. I could tell him about the hell of liquid fueled rockets with which we crossed the Ecliptic. I wonder how romantic he'd think one of those flimsy shells was if he had to live aboard it. And as for deepspacers—well, every man jack aboard a Company craft has trained on liquid-fueled jobs and has teethed on a rocket lining!

Well, when you deal with the public you've got expect this sort of thing, I guess. But if there's a sudden rash of deepspace madness, with a half dozen spacemen throwing their passengers to the Void, don't be surprised!

Someday I'll write a book about it, I think. It'll be a serious job, and I'll show people that deepspacing isn't child's play, even today...

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TODAY IS TOMORROW!

YESTERDAY'S tomorrow is today! The truth of this simple homily can be seen easily when you examine some of the predictions and prognostications made in yesteryear and compare them with the actual events of today. What makes this sport doubly fascinating is that we're very concerned in today's science-fiction with predicting what will happen fifty or a hundred years hence. The people of half a century ago were similarly interested even though they didn't know it as science-fiction.

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to spend an amusing hour or two, glance through some of the scientific magazines of fifty years ago. The predictions might amaze you. Very often, things we still marvel at were predicted matter-of-factly then.

You don't even have to go to the magazines of that period. A number of journals conduct regular columns in which they reprint excerpts and items from their columns of a half-century ago. While these news-items are usually rather quaintly worded—at least to our tastes—they reveal some fascinating predictions. Perhaps our own predictions will seem as quaint to our progeny.

It is also fascinating to consider some of the predictions which didn't come true. One example is the failure of the gas-filled Zeppelin which around nineteen hundred seemed to be the ultimate in air-conquering and which was assumed to be the master of space in the future years. We know this didn't work out. On the other hand numerous "guessers" of the time predicted the ultimate success of the automobile in displacing all animal and human labor in transportation. This was an accurate job.

What about our predictions? Will they hold for the future? It's pretty safe to predict that they will, we think. Such things as rockets, radar and atomic energy cast a long shadow before themselves. You don't have to have any specialized knowledge to realize the revolution they'll create. From our vantage point—high appreciation of science and the scientific method—it's likely that the predictions you've read about in science-fiction will be mighty valid.

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CAPTAIN LANCE HARFORD watched the scene with mounting horror. He stood transfixed, as if not believing that what he was witnessing was real. His speedster floated free in space a mere five hundred meters from the pirate raiders' craft and the merchant victim, the *Snustar*. And the scene transpiring in the control room was as clear on the visiplate as if Lance were there.

Duhammel's harsh voice grated from the speaker.

"I'm warning you Harford," it said with cold hatred. "If you touch a firing stud, I'll blast everyone in this room. And if you even breathe a radar pulse I'll do it real slow." He laughed cynically.

Lance saw the row of passengers and crew members in the merchant's control, standing in a single line. Two of the pirates stood to one side while Duhammel and two others went over them roughly appropriating even simple valuables like watches and jewelry.

Lance held himself in check. To make a

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single false move would mean the destruction of the passengers—or worse.

Duhammel paused before one of the passengers, a frightened, wide-eyed girl of statuesque beauty. He grinned evilly as he ran his hands lecherously over her shrinking body. Boldly he caressed her. Her hand went across his face with a resounding crack. Furiously the pirate chieftain balled his fist and knocked her to the floor.

"I'll tame you later," he said with venom in his face. "We'll take you along for fun."

Lance found his voice: "I warn you, Duhammel. Don't try that! It's going to be bad enough for you now without kidnapping—you fool!"

Duhammel looked into the visiscreen. Abruptly he spat.

"Shut up, Harford, or I'll gun this whole lot."

Impotently Lance watched the pirates transfer the stores and valuables to their ship. He watched the girl shoved into a space and taken aboard also. The quivering crew and passengers dared offer no opposition for fear of the results.

Lance's patrol ship could blast the pirate from space, but he dared not fire now—or later—not with the girl aboard.

When the pirate craft had vanished in a flare of power radiation Lance checked with the merchant.

"Can you proceed?"

"We can; the dirty swine didn't touch the controls or power."

"Fine," Lane replied, "I'm taking after them right now. Report to Base One at once."

"The girl—" the captain started to say.

"—Who was she?" Lance interrupted.

"Lana Terrence—Commander Terrence's daughter."

That was enough for Lance. He knew what Terrence would say. In twenty-four hours there would be every available ship in space, hunting relentlessly for the pirate vessel. But he had the head start and he had a tracer. Without further parlay, he shoved down the power trips and the small patrol rocket flared into incandescent activity as its tubes poured energy into space.

With mounting acceleration Lance followed the tracer needle. From its period he could determine distance. It—the pirate ship—had gone far even in this brief time, but no faster ship flits through space than a patrol vessel. Lance opened the power trips wide.

It took three days before he tagged the pirate vessel, a converted merchant vessel, hovering amidst the Asteroid Belt.

When Lance flashed radio contact, Duhammel's handsome visage appeared on the screen.

The self confidence was gone. Lance knew Duhammel had been intercepting the alarms of the past few days. His position was precarious. He had to bargain for he knew that Lance could blast him from the ether or if not, there'd be enough

patrol ships to do the job.

"Listen, Harford," Duhammel said rapidly, "I hold the girl—she's not harmed—the hell-cat—" here two pirates held the nude twisting writhing body of the girl before the screens— "See? I'll agree to deposit her unharmed on 'Roid 407—" it was a mining settlement—"if I get a twenty-four hour start."

Lance thought rapidly. He knew he couldn't trust Duhammel—but Duhammel had to trust him!

"I'll take the girl right now, Duhammel," he said, "and I'll guarantee you personal immunity for twenty-four hours." Here Lance bluffed. "Don't—and I'll blow you, the ship and the girl right out of space!"

Grateful for the twenty-four hour respite which would give him a fighting chance to flee to some port and scatter and lose himself and crew, Duhammel accepted with alacrity. In a matter of minutes the girl appeared in Lance's lock.

Bruised and filthy, scratched and utterly tired, Lana still was the most beautiful thing Lance had ever seen. Tenderly he bathed her—over her feeble protests—and assisted her to his bunk. Then he sat the twenty-four hours out radiating the Patrol relay stations of his guarantee to Duhammel.

He knew he hadn't had the authority to bargain like that, but he had had to do something. Besides his tracer still showed Duhammel to be in range.

Lance's ship finally caught up with Duhammel—twenty-five hours after the guarantee of immunity. Duhammel was driving wildly for Callisto in a mad effort to get there before the patrol. He could easily elude them in that unwholesome satellite's vast jungles.

But he was just a little too late. With Lana at his side, wild-eyed with excitement and numb with gratitude at her miraculous escape, Lance had a difficult time being unaware of her and concentrating on his work. He saw the rocket flash of Duhammel's craft heading in-plane, below and he knew what he must do.

In a flat parabolic curve he swirled down on the doomed pirate. The radar sights in Lance's ship showed their eerie phosphorescent greens as the electron beams danced. And then Lance pressed the surd.

From the nose of the patrol ship and at a distance of no more than twelve kilometers, the heat pulse flared. When it struck the pirate ship, that unfortunate vessel folded up like an accordion and then as peculiarly, exhaled as the pressure of the heat and gas dissipated.

Where the pirate Duhammel and his ship and crew had been a moment before was now nothing, nothing except a twisted blackened hulk of metal falling with ever-mounting acceleration to the Earth below.

Lance took Lana in his arms as if to shield her from the sight and from the way she snuggled up against him, he was sure that he was going to spend a lot more time shielding her...

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THE UNITED STATES is criss-crossed by a network of hundreds of thousands of miles of steel pipes ranging in diameter from eight to thirty inches. Through this network travels anything fluid or gaseous. Natural gas from Texas, oil, gasoline, liquid chemicals, and a hundred derivatives speed through these pipelines at high speeds, driven by powerful electric pumps.

Conveying materials this way is infinitely more economical than transporting them in tank cars or trucks; there are no losses, they may be precisely controlled, and they do not occupy precious space on trains, ships and trucks. This network is vital to us in peace and war.

It is amazing when one considers how it is possible to send liquids of an entirely different nature through the pipes one right after the other. Thus a hundred mile section of pipe may be filled with gasoline while right next to it is another hundred miles section of kerosene. The liquids do not diffuse into one another and automatic valves cut in at the right time to separate the two.

Pumping stations all along the way are capable of selecting portions of the liquids going through their line, shutting them hither and yon and in general, treating them exactly like a freight controller handles a group of box cars.

Recently efforts have been made to automatize this system, so that it can be controlled from a master switch-board, through electronics at either the source or the receiving end. For example, it is now possible for an entire pipeline over fifteen hundred miles in length with pumping stations located every fifty miles, to be completely managed from one end of the line through radio and carrier current signals!

Powdered materials, like grain and coal are due for a similar treatment in pipelines and in some case there are short pipelines, somewhat like conveyors which can handle these "semi-fluids". The whole transportation system for bulk materials is being revolutionized by the pipeline and the conveyor system. Where gigantic volumes of materials must be handled, it is obviously an economical to deliver them in cars, trucks, or ships when continuous streams can be handled so much more efficiently.

The maintenance of pipelines and conveyors is absorbing too. Little electric under-ground sweeping moles travel through pipe-lines at brisk speed removing scale and rust before them, much as a rodent chews his way underground.

In spite of the enormous size of the United States, in terms of transportation of materials, goods, and humans, it is becoming incredibly small. Need a million gallons of fuel oil in New York? O.K., you Texan pipers, pump the line full!

★ ★ ★

NEW BODIES FOR OLD!



**I've Made New Men Out of
Thousands of Other Fellows...**

**"Here's what I did for
THOMAS MANFRE...and
what I can do for you!"**

—Charles Atlas



GIVE me a skinny, popless, second-rate body—and I'll stain it so full of substance, bulging new muscle that your hands will grow bigger! . . . I'll wake a that sleeping energy of yours and make it hum like a high-powered motor! I'll, you'll feel and look different! You'll begin to LIVE!

**Let Me Make YOU a NEW MAN—
IN JUST 15 MINUTES A DAY**

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THEN I discovered my marvelous new muscle-building system—"Dynamic Tension." And it turned me into such a complete specimen of MANHOOD that today I hold the title "THE WORLD'S MOST PERFECTLY DEVELOPED MAN."

ARE YOU

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Always tired?
Nervous?
Lacking in confidence?
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**What to Do
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Does It Work?**

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"Dynamic Tension" is the easy, NATURAL method you can practice in the privacy of your own room—JUST 15 MINUTES EACH DAY—while your scrawny chest and shoulder muscles begin to swell, ripple . . . those spindly arms and legs of yours bulge . . . and your whole body starts to feel "alive," full of zip and go!

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All things begin with thought—it is what follows that may take your life out of the class of those who hope and dream. Thought energy, like anything else, can be dissipated—or it can be made to produce actual effects. *If you know how to place your thoughts* you can stimulate the creative processes within your mind—through them you can assemble things and conditions of your world into a happy life of accomplishment. *Mental creating* does not depend upon a magical process. It consists of *knowing how* to marshal your thoughts into a power that draws, compels and organizes your experiences into a worth-while design of living.

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